TOOLS FOR SMALL TOWNS

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Introduction

Small towns and small town life are sometimes idealized in movies and the media, and perhaps in our own memories as well. While actual small towns may not measure up to those imagined places, they do offer a real alternative to life in the big city. This alternative has grown more attractive as the quality of life in many urban areas has declined with congestion, crime, and the rising cost of living. Two other unfavorable aspects of urban life sometimes noted are the "placeless-ness" of many cities, and the reduced status of the individual within large, concentrated populations. "Placeless-ness" describes the phenomenon of clogged, often featureless, multi-lane highways leading past national chain stores and restaurants to reach look-alike residential developments. For these reasons, many people in the South—particularly those from predominantly rural family backgrounds—find small town or rural life increasingly appealing.

But in spite of their sometimes-rosy images, the smallest towns face the same problems and deal with the same issues as the biggest cities. Regardless of a community's size it must, at a basic level, provide the services and facilities necessary to promote the health, safety, and welfare of its citizens, and it must develop adequate revenue sources to pay for those services and facilities. All communities must also work to ensure that the quality of life their residents enjoy is maintained or enhanced as time passes and circumstances change.

Small towns may seem to have fewer and smaller problems, but they also have fewer and smaller resources to deal with those problems. Compared to bigger communities, they typically have smaller staffs, less revenue, and less available expertise, particularly in areas such as finance and planning. To overcome these disadvantages, small towns must aggressively search out and utilize those community assets that are present. In the context of community planning, the most important local assets are the residents themselves.

Many of the tools discussed in the "Choices for a Growing South" materials can be adapted for use in small towns. However, the following materials are designed specifically to introduce local officials, staff and citizens to tools that can be productively utilized without the involvement of planning professionals. Also included are some examples of small towns that have utilized these tools with some success, as well as a list of organizations that offer information, advice or funding to small towns engaged in planning activities.

A bit of encouraging news for those of you considering a planning-related project: Any planning activity you undertake, if conducted methodically and carried through to completion, will prove beneficial to your community. Encourage broad participation of community members from all walks of life, define community strengths and begin to identify ways to capitalize on these strengths. The worst thing you can do is nothing.

COMMUNITY ASSET INVENTORY

Overview

Before a smaller municipality or rural local government can effectively determine and implement a strategy regarding its future, it must first have a good understanding of its present. An activity that should be undertaken early in the planning process is an evaluation of current community conditions. Even the smallest community exhibits a variety of features, both positive and negative. In the past, many planning and development efforts have started from a negative perspective, focusing on deficiencies of the community and how to remedy them. In recent years, planners have started to use a technique with a more positive approach to evaluating existing conditions. Called an asset inventory, it stresses the assets of the community and attempts to build and capitalize on those assets, and to create linkages between them. While the two strategies sound very different, they are similar in that both are based on a careful and thorough assessment of existing community conditions.

A community asset inventory should, to the extent that circumstances allow, attempt to identify and list as many positive community characteristics as possible. The assets included in the inventory can be grouped under physical, cultural, quality of life, economic, and political headings. Examples of natural physical assets might include a temperate climate, plentiful sources of fresh water, exceptionally rich soils, or the presence of commercially viable mineral deposits. Cultural assets might include such items as historic buildings, an arts district, or famous residents. Quality of life assets include things such as low crime rates, unusual recreational opportunities, or the availability of a broad array of health services. Economic assets might include easy access to Interstate highways or commercial airline service, the presence of research and development facilities, links to export markets, ample energy supplies, or a strong community college system. Political assets might include functioning local governmental agencies or an established body of local regulations.

A sixth category of community asset is one that overlaps somewhat with the previous categories and might be termed social capital. This category focuses on the knowledge, skills, and resources present in individual citizens, as well as in the non-governmental groups, clubs, and societies in which citizens associate. These groups can be religious, recreational, civic, or social. It also focuses on the level of connectedness between residents in the community. Connectedness is an important indicator of community trust, cooperation, and resilience. Assets of this type are perhaps more difficult to quantify than those in the other categories, and may require significant effort to organize and utilize effectively. Nonetheless, these individuals and organizations often constitute a significant body of resources that should be tapped. The inclusion and mobilization of citizens at this level can also reap immeasurable secondary benefits by broadening the base of citizen involvement and increasing support for the planning effort. In some cases, particularly in very small communities, such individuals and organizations may have to substitute for governmental agencies that do not exist locally, or perform planning activities normally carried out by consultants in larger communities.

The form that the asset inventory takes is up to those who conduct it. The quickest, easiest way to organize the collected data is to simply list it, divided into the categories described in the preceding paragraphs. A list is useful simply by bringing a large amount of information about community assets together in a single place, and presenting it in an organized format. Communities may also choose to use drawn symbols, adhesive dots, or colored pushpins to denote on a map, or maps, the locations and types of various assets. This takes additional time and effort, but the graphic display of the information is usually more helpful than a list, particularly for non-professionals. Furthermore, the creation of the map often proves to be an educational and enjoyable exercise for those who create it. Whatever form it takes, an asset inventory should help those involved in planning efforts to visualize and understand existing conditions in the community, and to better discern any linkages between the various elements.

Appropriateness

Most communities, regardless of size, would benefit from the creation of an asset inventory. The information that goes into such an inventory often already exists, but in piecemeal form, such as in U.S. Census reports, local government agency filing cabinets, or in the heads of the longtime community residents and local government officials and staff. These sources of information exist all over the community, but none of them present a complete picture of the complexity of even a very small community. An asset inventory can help to create a more complete picture by gathering the existing information from all sources, selecting what is important, and making it available in a single organized and understandable form.

There are additional benefits to creating an asset inventory. Once such an inventory is completed and available, local governments, civic associations, churches, and other groups concerned with the community's future can base their decisions and efforts on a common body of information. Such a comprehensive body of accurate, up-to-date information should provide an invaluable basis for decision-making by local leaders. An inventory, especially one using maps or other graphic techniques, can often energize citizens by showing the positive attributes and the potential of their community. Actually seeing, or helping to create, a list or map showing assets can raise citizens' opinions of their own community and can generate enthusiasm for previously unseen local potential.

Implementation

The steps presented here are intended to serve as a rough guide on how to create an asset inventory. Every community is different, and you should adapt this framework to your situation, making whatever changes you feel are necessary to accomplish your goals in the most effective and efficient fashion. Key steps typically include:

1) Planning and organizing for the asset inventory project;
2) Collecting the information for the asset inventory;
3) Organizing the data;
4) Writing reports; and
5) Using and publicizing the inventory.

Planning and Organizing for the Asset Inventory Project

Before publicizing the study or calling for volunteers, the persons instigating the inventory should plan how the inventory will be carried out. This should not be viewed as an attempt to short circuit public participation, but rather as a necessary step to determine available resources, set preliminary goals, and establish a basic framework for what will actually take place and when. Once volunteers have come forward and are ready to get the inventory underway, it will be much more difficult to make those basic decisions. Too much time spent on catch-up planning at this point could cost the effort some volunteers.

A rough timetable for the study should be established, and decisions and arrangements made about where and when meetings will take place. Some asset information could be collected prior to public participation. This information could come from secondary sources, such as U.S. Census reports, or from local officials or governmental staff. This last group should be able to provide information about the availability, nature, and adequacy of local government assets such as personnel, equipment, and capital improvements.

It is important to plan for a level of activity that will not exhaust your resources before the project is complete. You should not despair if your situation dictates that volunteers perform much of the work. With minimal instruction, non-professionals can perform most of the tasks associated with the asset inventory as described herein. In fact, an enthusiastic group of citizen volunteers may collect more information than can be used. The actual listing of assets sometimes builds energy as it proceeds, with volunteers striving to outdo each other to come up with the most assets, or the most obscure asset. You should understand that there is no single right way to produce an asset inventory, and your community should adapt the general outline described here to fit your situation. As you make decisions about how best to conduct your study, remember that the whole reason for this activity is to gather information on the existing assets of your community. How you accomplish this goal is secondary.

Collecting the Information for the Asset Inventory

Once you have completed the pre-meeting planning with your core group of leaders, you can hold public meetings to solicit public participation in the asset inventory. Set a date and place for a meeting, and then publicize the meeting. If there is no local newspaper or other media, then post notices at the town hall, in local businesses, and at local schools and churches. If there are certain areas of the community or segments of the local population that may be underrepresented at the meeting, then target those citizens for extra recruiting efforts, such as door-to-door announcements. A brief summary of the planned activity should be included in any notices. When possible, "prime the pump" by including some of the asset categories and examples of local assets. If your community has a record of poor participation in such activities, you might consider combining the asset inventory activity with some other, perhaps more recreational, activity.

In its introductory segment, the public meeting should be conducted as would a town council or other formal local meeting. The project leader, or leaders, should explain what an asset inventory is, what sort of information is being collected and why and how an asset inventory will be useful to the community. The floor can then be opened for public participation and the listing of assets begun. How this is best accomplished will depend on the nature of your meeting, primarily the number of participants. If that number is small, say 15 to 25 persons, then listing assets using markers and a couple of easels and flip charts might suffice. Category headings could be written on the charts, with the citizens verbally offering their suggestions of local assets in each category. If the audience is much larger, consideration should be given to splitting into two or more groups in different parts of the room to create separate listings. The groups can swap lists after a certain length of time, or at a point when additions to the lists are nearing a standstill. This will result in some assets being listed more than once, but seeing the other group's list can generate more additions, and duplicates can easily be removed when the information is put into a final list. Initial asset inventory lists can be left in a public place for a certain length of time to enable citizens to stop by and make additions on their own.

Organizing the Data / Writing Reports / Using and Publicizing the Inventory

How you utilize the data from your asset inventory will, again, depend on the resources available. At the very least, the information should be gathered into a single place, and organized into a coherent, useable form. While a paper list is better than no list, an effort should be made to utilize an electronic format. A person, perhaps one of your volunteers, with moderate computer skills could use virtually any current model PC to convert your paper-and-pencil listings into a database. This will make updating of the information much easier, and will allow you to cross-reference the asset listing in multiple ways. Some assets, such as equipment and facilities, will fit easily and obviously into the database format. Less tangible assets, like neighborhood improvement associations or church-sponsored social services, may be more difficult to categorize and quantify precisely, but can still be made to fit into a database format.

Creating a report can be as simple as doing a brief synopsis of the data in each category, then combining them into a summary report. This report should give a general idea of what the inventory contains, and point out those areas of particular concern or note. A more sophisticated report could link the information in the inventory to community goals or conditions, or make comparisons with nearby communities or national standards. Having an inventory should make it easier to see potential linkages between assets, and how those assets and linkages could be used for community building. This "sum is greater than the parts" aspect of the inventory could also be incorporated into a report.

Many communities also choose to prepare a visual map of their assets. This helps to show community assets and resources in relation to one. This may help uncover strategies for revitalizing a specific area of the community or point to opportunities for collaboration between neighboring organizations.

It is important to maximize the return on the time and effort put into creating the inventory by spreading the word and utilizing the information. The information should be made available to the public—through the media, community meetings, and other vehicles. Publicizing the inventory can increase public awareness of community conditions and often energizes local residents to take action. An obvious use of the asset inventory and any resultant reports is as an aid to broad-based community goal setting efforts.

Examples

Western North Carolina

HandMade in America, launched in December 1993 with a grant from the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, has taken an unusual approach to economic development and renewal in Western North Carolina. Rather than recruiting new industries in the conventional way, HandMade in America has focused on creating long-term regional growth through the nurturing and promotion of handmade industries, many of which already existed in the area. Beginning in 1994, more than 360 area citizens participated in a regional planning process that resulted in the creation of a set of twenty-year goals, supported by action-oriented strategies focused on:

- Creating sustainable economic development opportunities that maintain the rural quality of life;
- Providing business and financial support for craftspeople; and
- Reinforcing a positive image of the region's craft culture through public relations and education.

These goals and strategies are intended to achieve the purpose to which HandMade is dedicated: making Western North Carolina the geographic center of handmade objects in the nation.

One of the projects is a revitalization program called The Small Towns Project. Begun in 1996, with the help of a grant from the Kathleen Price Bryan Family Fund, the project is intended to facilitate renewal and revitalization efforts in small towns in Western North Carolina. The Small Towns Project is based on a textured program of mentoring, technical assistance, self-help, and learning from each other and from neighboring communities. Assistance from the Appalachian Regional Commission, the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance, and the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina allowed the program to grow from the original four towns to eleven by 1999, with more requests still being submitted.

In 1998, HandMade began work with the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center on a documentation project that presents the renewal stories of the first six towns. *Small Voices, Big Songs* documents in words and pictures how the six towns, ranging in population from 138 to 1,770, have undertaken revitalization projects that celebrate the pride and vitality of small communities. *Small Voices, Big Songs* also includes a step-by-step explanation of the process used by The Small Towns Project. In summary, the process includes:

- Starting with a good plan based on the community's desires and assets;
- Seeking help from strong, knowledgeable partners;
- Raising funds;
- Seeking guidance from facilitators (provided by HandMade)
- Securing training in project management and nonprofit management; and
- Envisioning success.

Using this model, communities that traditionally had lacked resources or not seen themselves as advantaged, have created opportunities to learn, to grow, and to teach others about community revitalization.

For more information:

- Contact HandMade in America, The Small Towns Project, at P.O. Box 2089, Asheville, NC 28802, Phone: (828) 252-0121, Fax: (828) 252-0388, E-mail: wnccrafts@aol.com.
- See www.wnccrafts.org.

Lake Worth and Delray, Florida

This project was premised on the idea that strong relationships require effective communication. In both Lake Worth and Delray, communication between residents, community groups, and service providers sometimes suffered because communication styles and formats differed. The activities of this project were designed to give community groups tools and information in a format that would facilitate improved communication between them and the service providers. The project, carried out with assistance from the Florida Institute of Government, involved two resident groups: the Lake Worth West Resident Planning Group and the Southwest Delray Community Planning Process. Both these groups plan for community improvements, seek funds for selected projects, and work toward higher resident involvement in community affairs. Both communities are racially and ethnically diverse, with a mix of low- and moderate-income households, as well as a mix of renters and homeowners. Both communities were also considered to be in need of redevelopment.

The project design called for the creation of databases of U.S. Census information and community assets, and conversion of that data into user-friendly tables, charts and maps. Another goal of the project was to determine how easily people with little or no prior experience could learn to utilize these information techniques. Three students (one graduate and two undergraduates) with minimal exposure to information and communication techniques were hired in early 1999. Their tasks included initiating the statistical research, explaining the project to community residents and working with those residents to collect information. The students and residents did field work to identify programs and services, and the locations of a variety of neighborhood assets. Lake Worth focused on after-school programs in particular, while Delray had a much broader focus that included crime prevention, senior citizens services, education, and youth activities.

The final product is the Community Resource Guide. It contains a Community Profile consisting of data tables and charts that illustrate community conditions and compare them to surrounding areas. The Guide also contains an Asset Inventory of programs, services, and centers available to local residents. The Inventory includes not only assets within the community, but also those outside the community that are available to local residents. The Asset Inventory includes an Asset Map plotting the locations of service and program centers, parks, schools, and other assets in or near the community. Also included in the Guide is a listing of Internet resources related to community development.

The project resulted in creation of a useful document, and energized local residents to participate more fully in community affairs. However, it also illustrated the difficulties in using untrained people for such an undertaking. Acquiring the necessary skills takes time and training, with supervisory requirements increasing as worker training level falls.

For more information:

- Contact the Florida Institute of Government, Florida Atlantic University at (954) 229-4104 or see www.fau.edu/fiog.

Grainger County, Tennessee

This asset-mapping project focused on health issues in a small, rural county in East Tennessee. Before beginning the actual listing of assets, participants in the project identified five reasons for creating an asset inventory:

1) To revisit health priorities;
2) To update data and identify any new health issues;
3) To identify county resources;
4) To identify potential funding sources;
5) To identify those capacities not usually thought of as resources.

Conducted at a one-day retreat held in Dandridge, one of the small towns in Grainger County, the mapping project identified the usual health-related assets such as clinics, fitness, and nutrition programs; other local health providers and professionals; and national health-related programs and organizations such as the American Cancer Society. The project also identified less obvious assets such as church sponsored transportation programs, volunteer home care and visitation programs, individual volunteers, peer counseling and assistance groups, and other informal services and support. Although primarily looking at assets, the participants also identified areas where existing health problems indicated that improvements were needed, such as to the local road system and driver's education programs. The primary result of the asset-mapping project was the creation of a Resource Directory for county residents.

For more information:

- Contact the Tennessee Department of Health, East Tennessee Region, Community Development Division, at (865) 594-5340.

Things to Consider

- Determine available resources and plan the activity accordingly.
- Understand why you are undertaking the project and what you hope to gain.
- Plan and organize thoroughly before starting actual activity.
- Use your budget to conduct the best survey, rather than pay for fancy printing.
- Determine how data will be stored before starting the activity.
- Don't forget to plan for how the inventory, once completed, will be kept current.
- Volunteers, with minimal instruction, can perform much of the activity.
- Volunteers should reflect the diversity of the community.
- Don't use volunteers just for drudge work; they are the community.
- There should be a leader, or core group of leaders, to coordinate activities.
- Once the inventory is complete, use it and publicize it.
- After listing assets, volunteers should, where appropriate, add vital information, such as addresses, phone numbers, etc.

Additional Resources and Information

Resource materials on how to conduct community asset inventories include:

- AEL, Inc. "Community Asset Mapping," in *Rural School Administrators' Kit* (Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc., ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural and Small Schools, and the National Rural Education Association, 2001) at www.ael.org/rel/rural/pdf/mapping.pdf.

- Allen, John, Sam Cordes, and Jeff Hart. *Vitalizing Communities: Building on Assets and Mobilizing for Collective Action.* (Lincoln Nebraska: The Center for

Applied Rural Innovation, Institute for Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1999) at www.ianr.unl.edu/cari/communityguide.pdf.

- The Web site of the Connecticut Assets Network (CAN) has extensive links to publications and organizations related to community asset building. Contact CAN at (860) 571-8463 or visit their Web site at www.ctassets.org/index.cfm.

- Hampton, Chris and Catie Heaven. "Understanding and Describing the Community," in *Community Toolbox* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2000) at http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/EN/sub_section_main_1020.htm.

- Kansas University Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development. "Identifying Community Assets and Resources," in *Community Toolbox* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2000) at http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/EN/sub_section_main_1043.htm.

- Kretzmann, John and John McKnight. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, 1993). The introduction to the book and ordering information are available at www.northwestern.edu/ipr/publications/community/introd-building.html. Information on related workbooks by the authors is available at www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd/abcdworkbooks.html. A sample of an interview sheet to assist in conducting an asset inventory is available at www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd/abcdci.html.

- Mourad, Moustafa and Howard Ways. "Comprehensive Community Revitalization: Strategies for Asset Building," in Proceedings of the 1998 National Planning Conference (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1998) at www.asu.edu/caed/proceedings98/Mourad/mourad.html.

Organizational sources of assistance include:

- Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD). The ABCD Institute at Northwestern University is co-directed by John McKnight and John Kretzmann, co-authors of a key resource book on asset building (as noted above), *Building Communities from the Inside Out.* Faculty at the Institute have worked with many organizations and communities as consultants, workshop leaders, and speakers. The Institute has also produced numerous workbooks and publications related to community asset building. Contact the Institute at (847) 491-8711 or visit their Web site at www.northwestern.edu/IPR/abcd/abcdtopics.html.

- The Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies (CAST). CAST provides an example of how communities can map their assets via computer technology.

CAST was established at the University of Arkansas in September of 1991 in order to bring together the considerable expertise of a network of researchers with a long-standing history of Geographic Information Systems development at the University. Contact them at (501) 575-6159 or visit their Web site at www.cast.uark.edu/index_alt.htm.

- The Heartland Center for Leadership Development. The Heartland Center, a Nebraska-based nonprofit formed in 1995, focuses on leadership and skill building activities in small towns and rural communities. Asset mapping is often part of the activities employed in its community strategic planning processes. For example, the Heartland Center recently helped Viburnum and Cherryville Downs, Missouri, with combined populations of little more than 1,000, identify community assets that could be tapped to help lessen the impact of an expected closure of a major employer. Contact them at (800) 927-1115 or visit their Web site at www.4w.com/heartland/index.html.

- The Oklahoma Community Institute (OCI). OCI was created in 1995 to serve as a resource to those communities that want to help themselves through active participation and proven renewal strategies. The mission of the organization is "to encourage and enable Oklahoma citizens to improve their communities." Among its many services, the Institute guides communities in planning and conducting asset inventories. Contact them at (405) 552-5790 or visit their Web site at www.ocionline.org.

- South Carolina Center for Family Policy. Incorporated as a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization in 1991, the Center serves as the primary training and technical support organization for groups such as the state's 16 Community Youth Councils. In this role, the Center has assisted the Councils in conducting community asset mapping activities. Contact them at (803) 896-8486 or visit the Web site at www.scfamilypolicycenter.org.

- University Public Service and Extension Programs. Many universities have public service and/or extension programs that offer community development services. These centers can often provide technical assistance in developing and conducting a community asset inventories. (See Appendix A for a list of public service institutes and Appendix B for a list of extension services.)

Information Categories for a Community Asset Inventory

Economic

Employment
Workforce
Services
Finance
Manufacturing
Agriculture
Forestry
Construction
Exports
Extraction
Tourism / Recreation
Utilities
Telecommunications
Roads and highways
Railroad access
Air and water transport access
Bus & taxi availability

Quality of Life

Population and demographic change
Public safety
Accessibility
Social services
Education
Recreation
Cultural assets
Housing availability and quality
Local government

Natural/Physical

Climate
Geology
Soils
Hydrology
Topography
Vegetation
Wildlife
Energy resources
Mineral resources
Ecological assets

Culture/Structures

Historic resources
Famous residents
Physical design
Streetscape
Bike and pedestrian ways
Houses of worship
Local government plant
Educational facilities
Other structures

Political
Elected representatives
Partnerships with neighboring communities
Connections to Washington, DC and other political forums
Resident memberships in extra-community organizations

Social
Clubs and non-profit groups
Group memberships
Parent involvement in the schools
After-school activities
Volunteerism
Philanthropy
Pool of civic leaders
Religious activities

COMMUNITY NEEDS ANALYSIS

Overview

An early, and critical, step to perform in any planning process is an evaluation of current conditions in the community. One method often used is called a needs assessment, which is intended to identify community needs, to assess how well those needs are being met, and to determine what new or additional facilities or services might be required in the future. The term "needs" is used broadly in this context, and can mean many things. A need might be to remedy an existing problem, such as poor drainage in a neighborhood after heavy rains; a school building serving more students than it was designed to serve; or an intersection overwhelmed with traffic generated by a new development. A need might also be to anticipate or prepare for future development. This could include initiating infrastructure improvements to serve an area where new development appears imminent, or creating a support network for entrepreneurs. It could also mean determining what improvements could be made to the community that would improve residents' quality of life. These might include enhanced recreational facilities or services, a business incubator, or the provision of free adult literacy classes.

Appropriateness

A needs assessment is appropriate for any community. It can be of benefit in many ways, most related to the inherent advantages of making decisions and taking actions based on accurate and timely information, rather than on outdated information, guess work, "common knowledge" or other informal sources. The information collected with a needs assessment can be particularly helpful for:

- Targeting efforts and resources more efficiently and effectively;
- Evaluating existing programs, services and facilities;
- Providing justification for new or expanded programs or services;
- Understanding the community and its citizens;
- Assessing public opinion; and
- Identifying and understanding demographic and other changes in the community.

A needs assessment can also increase interest and support for public actions by generating a sense of involvement among the citizens taking part. Finally, a needs assessment may revitalize existing efforts by demonstrating their success, or by identifying needed changes to make those efforts more effective.

Implementation

An important thing to remember if you are considering conducting a community needs assessment is that there is no single process that must be followed in every detail. There are, however, some general guidelines that can be adapted for your particular situation. In its simplest form, a needs assessment can be broken into three steps, which are:

1) Planning for data collection
    - Assess the resources available for conducting the needs assessment
    - Determine the focus of the needs assessment
    - Select the method of data collection
    - Create a needs assessment questionnaire
    - Recruit and train volunteers for survey activities
    - Create a schedule for project activities
    - Create a work plan showing individual responsibilities
2) Data collection
    - Begin data collection
    - Monitor progress / Make necessary adjustments
    - Begin management system for collected data
3) Use of data after collection
    - Analyze and evaluate data
    - Create reports on results
    - Distribute data and/or reports

Planning for Data Collection

Pre-collection planning is the most important of the three steps, and must be handled with care and deliberation. Failure to plan adequately can result in poor decision making as to the specifics of how the needs assessment will be performed. These poor decisions can increase the likelihood of problems with data collection and result in inferior results. A steering committee or study group should be formed to lay the foundation for the needs assessment. This group can be composed of any combination of community officials, community employees, and citizen volunteers. Membership should reflect the diversity of the community, and must be made up of reliable individuals who can be counted on to attend all meetings and see the project through. If funds are available, consideration might be given to hiring a consultant, either private or from a public agency such as a regional planning commission, to assist with the needs assessment.

There are several questions that should be addressed during the planning phase, including:

1) What information is desired, and why?

One of the first steps in a needs assessment is to determine the purpose the study is intended to accomplish. The steering committee, based on their knowledge of local concerns, must define what issues the study will address, and what information must be collected to illuminate those issues. Generally speaking, a narrow focus will allow collection of detailed information about a limited number of issues, whereas a broader focus will yield less specific information, but can deal with a greater number of issues. For example, a needs assessment limited to available health services and facilities could ask detailed questions about very specific issues, while a more general study, one perhaps dealing with the whole array of local public services and facilities would be limited to more general questions about a wider array of issues.

2) Comparing costs to benefits, what is the best way to obtain this information?

Where information is concerned, more is almost always better. Unfortunately, more information typically requires a greater investment of time, effort, and resources. Some information, particularly demographic information, may already exist and be available from secondary sources such as U.S. Census reports, sales tax reports, police reports, or previously conducted surveys. In the likely case that these secondary sources do not contain all the information desired, there are several possible approaches to collecting additional data. These approaches vary in the time and resources required. The cheaper, faster methods typically yield less useful information, both in quality and quantity. These techniques for collecting information include:

- **Community Forum.** Public notice is given about the time, place and topic of a public meeting to discuss community needs. Those attending the meeting are given the opportunity to express their views and concerns about community issues. Though easy to conduct, and not without value, the community forum rarely reflects all the views of the community, and the varied citizen comments are sometimes difficult to translate into meaningful data.
- **Focus Group Forum/Survey.** Citizens of the community who possess particular skills, knowledge, expertise, or experience related to a particular topic or issue are asked to respond to a series of questions about those issues. Relatively easy to conduct, the focus group forum, though useful in the collection of specialized information, is also unlikely to reflect the varied views of the community-wide population.
- **Community Leaders Forum/Survey.** This approach is similar to the focus group, but solicits the views and concerns of community leaders and decision makers. The results are also similar to the focus group in that, though they may be of value, they likely do not reflect the diversity of views and concerns throughout the community.
- **Citizen Survey.** The final approach is one that typically requires the greatest investment of time and resources, but that also typically yields the most useful results. The citizen survey gathers information from a

representative sample of the community's population, which yields a body of information more generally representative of the community as a whole than do any of the previously mentioned methods. Survey information can be collected by interviews conducted in person or over the telephone, or by using hand-delivered or mailed questionnaires.

If this last approach is chosen, work should begin immediately to create the survey questionnaire and to develop a list of dependable volunteers to carry out the survey. With some training and preparation, non-professional citizen volunteers can perform much of the survey activity, but it is critical that the individuals be committed to the project. Volunteers who are absent often or who quit before the collection is complete can drain the vitality from more conscientious workers. It is sometimes difficult to demand a commitment from citizens who are offering to help, but it is crucial to the success of the project that there be a stable, predictable group of workers.

3) Once obtained, how will the information be analyzed, utilized, and distributed?

The steering committee should have a general idea of how the data will be utilized after collection is complete. Complex analysis of the data may require professional assistance, but volunteers with some computer skills can probably perform more basic manipulations such as percentages, averages, or ratios. Decisions will also be necessary as to how the results will be distributed. Will they be made available just to officials and staff, or to the general public? If the results are to be released to the public, what will be the form of the final report and how is it to be distributed? If a final report or press release is to be written, who will be responsible for its creation?

Data Collection

Once the steering committee has chosen a form of data collection and determined the focus of the study (and it has been agreed upon by the town council or whatever body has authority), it is time to organize the actual collection process. A timetable/work schedule should be created to show anticipated dates of when each stage of activity will begin and end, as well as individual responsibilities for various activities. Collection activities should be monitored to insure that data is being collected in a consistent, methodical fashion. Adherence to the schedule should also be monitored and any problems addressed and necessary changes made.

Use of Data After Collection

Once data collection is complete, it is important to finish the data analysis and report as quickly as possible. Release of the information, whether through reports for official use or press releases and other media distribution, can achieve the greatest effect if it follows closely after data collection. What reports are to be created, and by whom, should be determined before data collection is complete, to help insure timely release of the materials.

Examples

Lauderdale County, Tennessee

In 1998, the Lauderdale County Community Health Council conducted a needs assessment "to determine the health needs of the community and develop a plan of action for improving the health status of people in Lauderdale County." Located on the Mississippi River in northwestern Tennessee between the Hatchie River of the south and the Forked Deer River on the north, Lauderdale has approximately 24,000 residents.

The assessment process began in 1996 as local health officials and community leaders recognized the negative effects of Medicaid, AFDC, and reimbursement rates reform. These reforms were causing additional strain on the already limited community resources. Utilizing a "community diagnosis" process developed by the Tennessee Department of Health, the Council conducted a data-driven assessment that identified and prioritized community health problems. Data sources included a survey of the community's health status, State health statistics, a survey conducted by the University of Tennessee addressing behavioral risk factors, and the Department of Health's database. Once the list of community health problems was identified, they were prioritized based on size, seriousness, and effectiveness of intervention. Finally, work groups were created to develop specific goals and design appropriate interventions.

For more information:

- See http://web.utk.edu/~chrg/hit/main/reports/commdiagnosis/lauderdale/cover.htm.

Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Counties, South Carolina

The Trident United Way spearheaded a needs assessment initiative in this three-county area, with a goal of identifying the most critical health and human services needs in the region. Rather than focusing on every need in the region, the study evaluated needs in five key areas, including education, housing, employment, health, and neighborhood/community development. The United Way contracted with the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments for assistance in collecting and analyzing the data. A Needs Assessment Committee oversaw the entire project, with subcommittees formed to look more closely at each of the five chosen issue areas. In addition to gathering published data from the U.S. Census and other similar sources, the group mailed surveys to human service agencies throughout the region to gather their thoughts on community needs. Eight focus group meetings were also held in order to hear from area residents.

For more information:

- See www.tuw.org/needs/titlepage.html.

Things to Consider

- Organize and plan carefully, and everything else should flow smoothly.
- The intended purpose of the needs assessment should be clear.
- A secretary and/or treasurer is needed to keep track of funds and paperwork.
- Keep your resource limitations in mind when planning the needs assessment.
- Volunteers can perform much of the work, but they must be committed and well trained.
- The survey questionnaire content must be composed and reviewed carefully.
- Phone and in-person interviewers must not coach or explain.
- Data should be collected from a sample that reflects community diversity.
- Data must be collected in a consistent manner.
- Collection must be monitored for consistency and scheduling.
- Results of the needs assessment should be utilized and publicized.
- Established organizations (churches, civic clubs, etc) might “adopt” the project.
- Established organizations should not wield undue influence.

Additional Resources and Information

Resource materials on how to conduct community needs assessments include:

- Butler, Lorna and Howell, Robert, *Coping with Growth: Community Needs Assessment Techniques* (Logan, UT: Western Rural Development Center, 1993) at http://extension.usu.edu/wrdc/resources/coping/wrep44.pdf.

- Hampton, Chris. “Conducting Concerns Surveys,” in *Community Toolbox* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2000) at http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/EN/sub_section_main_1045.htm.

- Iowa State University Extension. “Needs Assessment Strategies for Community Groups and Organizations,” at www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess.

- Israel, Glenn and Thomas Ilvento. “Everybody Wins: Involving Youth in Community Needs Assessment,” *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 1995, at www.joe.org/joe/1995april/a1.html.

- Kansas University Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development. “Conducting Needs Assessment Surveys,” in *Community Toolbox* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2000) at http://ctb.lsi.ukans.edu/tools/EN/sub_section_main_1042.htm.

- Utah State University Extension. "Community Needs Assessment Survey Guide," at http://extension.usu.edu/coop/comm/survey/survey.htm.

Organizational sources of assistance include:

- Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC). For those communities along the Mississippi River, the MRPC may be a source of data and access to technical assistance. The MPRC is a multi-state organization that works collectively to preserve, promote, and enhance the scenic, historic, and recreational resources of the Mississippi River, to foster economic growth in the corridor, and to develop the scenic and historic parkway known as the Great River Road. The ten states and one province that comprise the MRPC include: Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi Missouri, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Ontario. For more information, call (763) 212-2560 or visit the Web site at www.mississippiriverinfo.com.

- National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP). The NRDP is an initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and has the goal of helping rural communities improve their quality of life. It does this through the promotion of collaborative partnerships among local, state, tribal, and federal governments, as well as the for-profit and nonprofit private sector. There are currently 40 State Rural Development Councils in its network. The NRPD Web site offers a comprehensive list of Internet links for rural development. For more information, call (202) 690-2394 or visit the Web site at www.rurdev.usda.gov/nrdp.

- University Public Service and Extension Programs. Many universities have public service and/or extension programs that offer community development services. These centers can often provide technical assistance in developing and conducting a community asset inventories. (See Appendix A for a list of public service institutes and Appendix B for a list of extension services.)

COMMUNITY PLANNING AND VISIONING

Overview

The comprehensive plan is perhaps most commonly thought of as a glimpse, or "vision," of a community's future. This is an accurate but incomplete definition of the plan, which must also take into account the present and the past. The plan should provide both an evaluation of the current situation of the community, including both positive and negative characteristics, and a review of the recent history that led to the current state. The plan should address how best to face current problems and avoid future problems, as well as how to make the most of current and future assets and opportunities. Perhaps most of all, the plan should reflect what the local residents want for themselves and their community. This is where the visioning process, which is discussed in detail in the Visioning Handbook section of the "Choices for a Growing South" materials, intersects with the rest of the planning process.

The Standard Planning Enabling Act, enacted in 1928, serves as the basis for the planning laws of many states. This act states that the purpose of a plan is the promotion of the health, safety, prosperity, order, and general welfare of the community and its citizens by assuring coordinated, adjusted, and harmonious development. Among the areas the plan should address are wise use of public money, efficient provision of public utilities and services, future distribution of population and development, traffic and circulation, and public safety. The plan affects every resident, therefore, it is important to make every effort to have broad participation in the creation or updating of the plan, and to make the plan easily available to all interested parties.

Though it is up to the community to determine what their plan contains, there are some fairly standard items typically included. The plan should include a broad overview, as well as a statement of its intended purpose and use. An overall purpose statement describes the intent of the citizens (as determined during the planning process) as to the general direction of the community's future. This statement of overall purpose should also serve as a general guide for the decisions and actions of elected officials and public employees.

The plan should include an evaluation of current conditions in the community, as determined by surveys, inventories, and other direct observations, as well as from public records and other reliable secondary sources. This evaluation should include areas of opportunity as well as areas of concern, and is often divided into sections that include physical, social, economic, and political concerns. These sections could be further broken down into fairly specific subsections. Physical concerns could be natural, such as the existence of steep slopes, or cultural, such as the presence of important historic buildings. Quality of life concerns might include population loss or a rapid increase in the number of new citizens who don't speak English. Economic concerns include items such as how to pay for public services, or how to respond to the loss of a major employer.

Political concerns include public policy, regulation, and the scheduling and financing of capital improvements.

To translate the overall purpose statement into a more useful guide for citizens, officials, and developers, the plan should contain more specific growth and development policies, broken down along roughly the same lines as the evaluation of current conditions. Among the aspects of the community that this guide should address are public utilities, other public facilities and services, transportation and circulation, industrial and commercial development, housing, and the general health safety and welfare of the community and its citizens. Though more specific than the overall purpose statement, these policies should be general guides, subject to adjustment or modification as conditions or attitudes in the community change.

At the most specific level, the plan should have a set of strategies to accomplish the stated local policy and it should give some direction as to whose responsibility it is to implement each part of the plan. These strategies should reflect local attitudes toward growth and growth management, and should address such issues as land use type and density; relationship of new uses to nearby existing uses; access to streets, water, sewer and other services and facilities; and the effect of new land uses on the area's physical resources. The plan should describe a development review process, taking into account the relation between the plan, the zoning ordinance, and the subdivision regulations. The plan should contain a general outline of anticipated capital improvements such as streets, water systems, parks, and other public facilities.

Often, a comprehensive plan will contain a section that might be termed as an action plan or strategic plan. This section addresses shorter-range priorities, and acts as a link between immediate actions and long-range goals. This section could also include directions for the short- to mid-range activities of public officials and employees in implementing the policies and programs. This section of the plan should be reviewed yearly, and amended as necessary to reflect new ideas, conditions, and priorities. An action or strategic plan could also take the form of a stand-alone document, but is more likely to be successfully implemented if it is tied to the long-range, broad vision of a comprehensive plan.

Appropriateness

A full blown strategic planning and visioning process can be a lengthy and complex task. For small communities with limited financial resources, hiring professionals to perform or assist with the process may not be possible. That does not mean that a small community cannot utilize and benefit from the process. A dedicated core group of volunteers or local government officials and staff, assisted by a larger number of more casual volunteers can successfully follow the process outlined in the following section. It may be necessary to scale back somewhat, and look only at what are determined to be the key areas of local concern.

Implementation

One of the most important things to remember in regard to implementation is that planning is a continual process. Even in the smallest, most stable community, change is continual and must be addressed in the comprehensive plan. As the elements of a plan are implemented through various projects and programs, monitoring and evaluation should also occur. If necessary, adjustments can be made, from fine-tuning the projects to amending the plan. It cannot be overemphasized that the plan is not a static picture of the idealized future of a community, but rather a work in progress. As long as the community is changing, so should the plan.

A fairly common process for community planning breaks the activity into three areas—policy, planning, and management. Policy includes evaluating existing conditions, determining local values and reaching community consensus on a view of the future. The planning stage is where alternative actions and solutions are formulated, projects and programs are developed, and responsibilities for implementation are assigned. Management activities include the actual implementation of the projects and programs, monitoring and evaluation of those projects and programs, and the making of whatever adjustments or changes are needed. Again, these three activities should not be seen as consecutive steps toward a finished product, but as continuous and concurrent steps to deal with the ever-changing conditions in the community.

Policy Activities

One of the most important policy stage activities is the analysis of existing conditions, including the identification of problems and opportunities, as well as the determination of local values. This information forms the foundation of all other activities in the planning process. Additionally, this is the stage where, based on the information just mentioned, public policy is developed, long-range goals defined, and short-range objectives set. It is critical that information that bears on these important decisions be collected and analyzed carefully. Those involved in the planning process must understand the community, including its liabilities as well as its assets, to properly evaluate the possible impacts and outcomes of their decisions and actions.

For the sake of clarity, these existing conditions are quite often grouped according to whether they are positive or negative in nature. Positive conditions might be subdivided further into assets and opportunities. Assets are those conditions or factors present that in their current state would be considered by most people to be positive in nature. Opportunities are those conditions or factors that have the potential of evolving or being developed into assets. Negative conditions might be subdivided into constraints and liabilities. Constraints are characteristics that, though negative, can be mitigated by some action or treatment. Liabilities are those negative factors that cannot be changed or ameliorated, and, therefore, must be worked around.

As discussed in further detail in the “Community Asset Inventory” section above, the information to be collected for the inventory of existing conditions can be broken into five areas: economic, natural/physical, quality of life, culture/structures, political and social/civic capacity. Some of this information can be obtained from secondary sources, such as the U. S. Census or various state, regional, or local governmental agencies. Much of the information will require direct observation or collection, but persons without special training or planning expertise can carry out these activities, in many cases.

In addition to the inventory and analysis of existing community conditions, policy activities should also include determining local values toward the community and its resources, and reaching some consensus about the use of such community assets as land, natural and human resources, and tax dollars. The focus of this portion of the planning process is the long-term future, and goals are likely to be general in nature. Most residents want the community to prosper, be healthy and safe, function efficiently and treat all residents fairly and equally. To address how to accomplish these broad goals, choices must be made about more specific objectives and how best to achieve them. These decisions require knowledge and understanding of the community's problems, opportunities, and resources. This requires revisiting the inventory and analysis done earlier in the process, illustrating the continuous activity of each step.

Planning Activities

Planning activities include developing alternative actions to address problems, then, guided by public policy, choosing the best alternative. This stage of the planning process takes a shorter view of the future. Effectively and efficiently converting policy to action is often difficult, and the proposed alternatives should be weighed carefully as to the advantages and disadvantages of each choice. Because public money is limited, some public consensus must be reached as to priorities. Because of their critical nature, and the time and expense necessary to expand or replace them, public facilities, and the public investments they require, should be an important part of any plan.

Local governments should budget for capital improvements, operations, and maintenance in order to provide and maintain the facilities and services necessary to make possible the future the community wants for itself. An overall strategy must be developed, with the roles and responsibilities of individuals and agencies made clear. It will be necessary in some cases to develop benchmarks to measure the performance or progress of some of the programs and projects. Budgets, regulations, laws, and procedures should all work together to achieve the public policy as stated in the plan.

Management Activities

Management encompasses all the activities involved with carrying out the plans. Management has an immediate perspective. It is not just concerned with the implementation, but also with the monitoring and evaluation of plan effectiveness or progress. Finally, management includes making adjustments to the plan and taking actions necessary to best reach the goals.

Examples

Martin County, Florida
Commissioners held a series of community workshops throughout Martin County to develop and refine guiding principals and indicators for a vision of a sustainable Martin County by the Year 2020. The workshops focused on environmental, land use, and transportation issues facing the county. The workshops brought together individuals representing business, local government, civic organizations, environmental, and other special interest groups, as well as interested citizens. A consensus was reached as to the goals and strategies that will result in a sustainable Martin County by 2020.

For more information:

- For general information, see www.martin.fl.us/GOVT or, for information on their sustainable development plan, www.martin.fl.us/GOVT/depts/gmd/sustain. Or call the Country Administrator's office at (561) 221-2360.

Perry County, Arkansas
The Strategic Vision Program for the Year 2020 and Beyond was created in 1991 to address Perry County's poverty and stagnant economy. Although the focus of the program was on developing tourism, it also resulted in the creation of a strategic plan for preparing central Arkansas to develop and prosper in the 21st century. One of Perry County's most pressing problems was an economy too-heavily based on the timber industry, which had been declining for at least a decade. Workers and businesses directly related to timber harvesting and processing were not the only ones to feel this decline's effects throughout the county. Unfortunately, the county lacked any other manufacturing or service-based industries, and did not have the infrastructure to support any new, large manufacturing or service facilities.

To address the problem, the Lake Sylvia Community Project Group (LSCPG), a local non-profit community activist group, and the U.S. Forest Service formed a public/private partnership to develop the *Strategic Vision Program for the Year 2020 and Beyond*. The Vision proposed the development of tourism as an alternative industry that could generate increased business not tied to the fortunes of the timber industry. Tourism would also capitalize on the area's recreational opportunities and scenic beauty. To coordinate these activities, organizers established the Perry County Tourism Association. Though focused heavily on tourism, the plan also addressed the economy, education, health care, infrastructure, and sanitation.

The Strategic Vision Program for the Year 2020 and Beyond illustrates how rural citizens and non-governmental organizations, in collaboration with local, state and federal governments, can address their problems and move toward sustainable economic change.

For more information:

- Contact the USDA Forest Service in Arkansas at (501) 889-5176 or visit the USDA Web site at www.rurdev.usda.gov.

Brunswick County, Virginia

In August 1997, Brunswick County, Virginia, began the process of updating its comprehensive plan. Like many rural counties in Virginia and the nation, Brunswick County, with a population just under 16,000, faced many planning challenges. To sustain its vitality, the county needed to expand its tax base, maintain its infrastructure, retain existing jobs, create new jobs, and provide services. But the county was also committed to protecting its environment, natural resources and quality of life. Fortunately, county leaders understood the importance of community input in the planning efforts to achieve these seemingly contradictory goals.

Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of their planning process was the exhaustive and thorough effort by which public discussion and input were encouraged throughout the county. Several methods of soliciting and obtaining citizen input were utilized throughout the planning process. The county established a 25-person community advisory council to work with the 11-member Planning Commission, 5-member County Board of Supervisors and Brunswick County staff. Working together, these groups identified issues of importance to county residents and suggested alternative actions to address the problems related to these issues. In addition to creating the citizen advisory council, the county also prepared and distributed a public opinion survey to county residents. Information collected on the surveys was evaluated and utilized in the planning process.

A final draft of the updated comprehensive plan, under the title VISION 2015, was completed in the fall of 1998. After a unanimous favorable recommendation from the Brunswick County Planning Commission, VISION 2015 was adopted by a unanimous vote of the Brunswick County Board of Supervisors in December 1998.

For more information:

- Contact the Brunswick County, Virginia, Planning Department at (804) 848-0882.

Things to Consider

- Remember that, to be successful, planning must be a continual process.
- Methodically assessing current conditions and looking to the future is beneficial to all of the community, and should involve representatives from all segments.
- The purpose of planning is to assist with future decision-making, not to attempt to make those decisions in advance.
- Recognize the limitations of available resources and plan accordingly.
- Modify the outlined process as needed to fit your situation.

- Vigorously seek out sources of free professional assistance and advice.
- Local volunteers may not create a highly technical, polished plan, but such a plan is not necessarily inferior.
- Citizens possess the greatest knowledge of the community, and have the biggest stake in its future.
- Visioning is critical to the planning process and should be initiated at the outset of and continued throughout the project.
- How you approach the visioning process must be tailored to the circumstances of the community situation.
- Results of the visioning process should be evident in your final document.
- At its most basic level, planning addresses five questions:
    1) Where are we?
    2) How did we get here?
    3) Where do we want to go?
    4) What is the best way to get there?
    5) How do we measure our progress?

Additional Resources/Information

Key sources of resource material on comprehensive planning include:

- American Planning Association (APA). APA (which also has state chapters) is a nonprofit, professional and educational association that promotes the field of planning. It represents 30,000 practicing planners, elected and appointed officials, and citizens concerned with city and regional planning. The APA can be reached in two locations: in Chicago at (312) 431-9100 and in Washington, D.C. at (202) 872-0611. Their Web site, at www.planning.org, includes an on-line catalog of books and reports related to all aspects of planning (click on "Planners Book Service"). One such resource is the *Small Town Planning Handbook*, which APA published in 1995.

- Planning Commissioners Journal (PCJ). PCJ is a bi-monthly publication targeted at citizen planners, including members of local planning commissions and zoning boards. Users can search on-line, at www.plannersweb.com, for numerous articles related to comprehensive planning.

- Sustainable Communities Network (SCN). The SCN is a network of communities committed to sustainable development. SCN promotes and publicizes success stories and offers news, listings of funding sources, and access to publications on sustainable communities. For more information, visit www.sustainable.org.

Other organizational sources of assistance include:

- Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet). ACEnet is a community economic development organization located in rural southeastern Ohio. The mission of ACEnet is to build the capacity of local communities to network, innovate, and work together to create a strong, sustainable regional economy that has opportunities for all. ACEnet uses a sectoral strategy, currently focusing on the food and technology sectors of the economy. For more information, call (740) 592-3854 or visit the Web site at www.acenetworks.org/.

- Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Congress established the ARC in 1965 to support economic and social development in Appalachia. The Commission is a unique partnership composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states and a presidential appointee representing the federal government. Grassroots participation is provided through local development districts—multi-county organizations with boards made up of elected officials, businesspeople, and other local leaders. The ARC provides grant support and technical assistance for community development and other activities. Visit their Web site at www.arc.gov.

- The U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). EDA was established under the Public Works and Economic Development Act of 1965 to generate jobs, help retain existing jobs, and stimulate industrial and commercial growth in economically distressed areas of the United States. EDA grant funds and technical assistance is available to rural and urban areas experiencing high unemployment, low income, or other severe economic distress. EDA has recently begun to encourage its local grantees to undertake strategic planning that incorporates a careful assessment of the internal and external factors affecting the community's future. EDA supports communities in this effort through its local development districts, regional offices, and EDA University Centers. For more information, visit www.doc.gov/eda.

- Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI). RUPRI conducts policy research and facilitates public dialogue to assist policymakers in understanding the rural impacts of public policies and programs. RUPRI is involved in rural policy issues such as health care, telecommunications, finance, welfare reform, community decision support and community/regional economic analyses. Based in Columbia, Missouri, RUPRI can be reached at (573) 882-0316. Or visit their Web site at www.rupri.org.

- Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC). SRDC is one of four regional rural development centers supporting research and extension efforts to improve the lives of people living in non-metropolitan areas of the United States. SRDC serves twenty-nine Land-Grant institutions in thirteen Southern states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. For more information, call (662) 325-3207 or visit their Web site at www.ext.msstate.edu/srdc.

INTER-COMMUNITY COOPERATION

Overview

Inter-community cooperation is the partnering of two or more entities for the purpose of more effectively and efficiently dealing with issues that affect all the partners. Such partnerships can involve municipal or county governments, or non-governmental organizations such as universities, civic associations, or professional organizations. These partnerships can entail complex joint projects, or simply the free exchange of information and expertise. Compared to entities acting independently to address a shared problem, inter-community cooperation should result in better coordination between partners, heightened effectiveness in addressing issues, and increased availability of resources.

Such partnerships can deal with physical issues, as when multiple jurisdictions or parties cooperate to protect a shared watershed, undertake a flood hazard abatement project, or manage growth and development. Multiple partners might provide combined fire or police protection, thereby improving the level of service, eliminating overlapping or redundant services, increasing equipment utilization, and reducing costs. Inter-community cooperation can also yield benefits in the planning and construction of streets, water and sewer systems, or other forms of infrastructure. Such partnerships could be beneficial in many other settings, limited only by the circumstances of the potential partners. A careful assessment of an existing situation and of how the affected parties are dealing with the situation individually can reveal if inter-community cooperation can be expected to yield benefits.

Appropriateness

In today's world, few communities can afford to go it entirely alone. Scarce public dollars impel all governments to consider more creative cost-saving measures, and shifting economic realities require development strategies based more on natural economic regions rather than narrow political jurisdictions. However, there are several questions that should be answered before committing your community or organization to a partnership with other entities.

1) Do the potential partners have shared goals?

   Just because two communities, or parties, share a problem or circumstance, they do not necessarily have the same goals or desire the same outcome in regard to that situation. Whatever situation the parties may have in common, it must be determined that the goals and desired outcomes of all parties are compatible or complementary.

2) Are the relative circumstances of the potential partners such that cooperation will tend to reinforce strengths, rather than weaknesses?

At a basic level, inter-community cooperation might entail nothing more than increased communication and information sharing between officials and staff of two or more communities. In a simple example of partnership, a community might have a particularly knowledgeable and effective Engineering Department, but suffer from a less proficient staff in the Revenue and Finance Office. Sharing information and expertise would likely be of little help if the second community were in essentially the same situation. However, if proficiency levels of the departments in the second community were the reverse of those in the first, a mutually beneficial arrangement might be possible. This principle of complementing strengths and weaknesses can be generalized to include other areas of potential cooperation, such as staffing and equipment levels in various departments, water and sewer treatment capacity, and provision of fire and police protection.

3) What factors indicate that inter-community cooperation will yield benefits proportionate to the efforts and investments of the partners?

   The fact that two or more communities share a common interest is not reason enough to assume that an inter-community cooperative effort would necessarily be beneficial. The specific circumstances of all the potential partners' connections to the situation must be clarified and evaluated. While all partners do not have to share precisely the same goals for the cooperative effort, the goals must be such that one community's goal is not accomplished at the expense of another's. Additionally, great care should be taken to insure that benefits from the cooperative effort are proportional to each partner's investment in the cooperative. A lasting partnership must be built on mutual trust and reciprocity.

4) Is there strong support within the community for a cooperative effort?

   Even if, based on facts and figures, a cooperative effort appears to be a sure success for all parties, it should not be seriously considered without a strong show of support from local officials and citizens. Garnering support for a new initiative can be difficult, and may be complicated by the rivalries often present between adjacent communities, or between towns and counties. These feelings can be strong, and must be accounted for in any evaluation of the potential outcome of a cooperative venture. It may or may not be possible to overcome these feelings with a clear and strong presentation of the likely benefits of partnering.

5) If the cooperative effort proves to be of little use, or is detrimental to the good of your community, how difficult will it be to dissolve the partnership?

   If a decision is made to enter into a partnership, care must be exercised to insure that any charters, by-laws, regulations, or agreements are written in a fashion that allows partners, with a reasonable show of cause, to withdraw from the arrangement painlessly.

Key Implementation Steps

1) Determine areas where cooperative efforts may be mutually beneficial.
2) Initiate contact with potential partners.
3) In conjunction with other parties, examine and evaluate the existing situation.
4) Clarify anticipated benefits, set goals, and determine objectives.
5) Develop an agreement defining the rights and responsibilities of each partner.
6) Include amendment and termination procedures in the agreement.
7) Establish benchmarks to evaluate the program once it is underway.
8) Secure needed approvals from decision-making bodies.
9) Initiate the program.
10) Monitor, evaluate, and make necessary changes to the program.

At each step care should be taken to make sure that there is community support for the proposed partnership. This is particularly true for partnerships initiated by local government staff, such as multiple local public works departments coordinating efforts on a drainage or flood control project. In these cases, particularly in later stages where commitments may be made, staff should take every precaution to insure that their actions have the support of the local government and community.

Examples

St. Helena Island, South Carolina
In 1993, the Penn Center, an institution set up in 1862 to teach self-sufficiency on St. Helena Island, in collaboration with the Neighborhood Legal Assistance Program and the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, established the Sea Islands Preservation Project. The project's first priority was to set up a facility to train community leaders and public officials who could then begin the process of building a community vision and formulating a strategic plan for St. Helena Island. Meeting on weekends for six-month sessions, community leaders and public officials from coastal communities studied planning, zoning, growth management, economic development, and environmental issues.

Applying what they learned, the graduates broke into committees, drafted specific strategies, and held public forums to broaden the constituency of those committed to a sustainable future for St. Helena Island. Their goal was to develop a master plan that would include land use goals for the island, a set of regulations to protect its character, and a development study and plan for the revitalization of the island's economy. The studies done by the participants in the Penn School initiated several comprehensive strategies for human and economic development. These included:

- Establishment of an economic development strategy;
- Product development and marketing strategies;
- Legal assistance for land ownership;
- Land use planning;
- Historic building preservation; and

- Sustainable forestry.

The Sea Islands Preservation Project has shown the larger community of St. Helena Island what is possible with commitment, expertise, and innovative coalition building. The project demonstrates that multiple communities can work together to develop successful strategies that have human, economic, and environmental dimensions, while preserving traditional lifestyles and values. The Project also illustrates that partnerships with regional and national groups can enhance the activities of local groups and provide much needed legal and financial advice and support.

For more information:

- Contact Emory Campbell, Executive Director, Penn Center, at (803) 838-2432, or see the Penn Center's Web site at www.angelfire.com/sc/jhstevens/penncenter.html.

Griffin, Georgia

The City of Griffin, Georgia, and Spalding County formed a partnership to focus on stormwater and watershed basin issues along shared boundaries. This coordinated approach reduces duplication of effort, better serves the public, and improves the cost effectiveness for both entities in resolving drainage issues. The two local governments have agreed to conduct coordinated studies on contiguous basin issues as deemed necessary, to insure consistency in watershed basin management planning to best serve the citizens of both communities, and to facilitate a proactive watershed management program in furtherance of the common goals and interests of all the citizens of both communities.

For more information:

- Contact Brant Keller, Public Works Director, City of Griffin, at (770) 229-6425.

Roanoke County, Virginia

Recognizing that the Blue Ridge Parkway is a national treasure, leaders in Roanoke County, Virginia, were concerned that growth in rapidly urbanizing areas of the county, unless controlled in some fashion, might diminish the Parkway's natural beauty. They were particularly concerned that residential development on two tracts, already optioned by developers and easily visible from the Parkway would threaten majestic views that had been cherished by travelers for years.

County leaders brought together representatives of public agencies, private non-profit groups, and developers for a three-day workshop to discuss options available to allow development of the land without destroying the views. The goal of the meeting was to create design options for the two pieces of property that would be economically feasible for the developers, would protect the views from the Parkway, and meet the county's development regulations. The design chosen, and agreed to by all parties, drew heavily from the Planned Residential Development concept of increased densities allowed on some portions of the site, in exchange for preserved open space on other portions. The design plan also called for physical enhancements such as walking paths and park areas.

The workshop and community meetings, plus the consultant's fee, cost the county just $16,000, a small price to pay for the preservation of a national treasure that is also an important asset for the local area, which is dependent on tourism. By bringing together a coalition that included representatives from all the interested parties, Roanoke County was able to find agreement through consensus building between the public and private interests. Flexibility on design by the developers, and on regulation by Roanoke County, made it possible to protect the important Parkway views, while maintaining the property rights of individual land owners.

For more information:

- Contact Roanoke County, Virginia, Community Relations, at (540) 772-2010.

Macon, Georgia
The Central South Revitalization Project involved a partnership between Mercer University, the City of Macon, and various community agencies and institutions to:

1) Build the capacity of the local community to help itself;
2) Increase public safety in the area;
3) Expand opportunities for local youth; and
4) Clean and rebuild the neighborhood.

Although carried out in a small city, this project illustrates the potential for partnerships between government, local organizations, and university faculty and students. The project managers set clear goals and objectives, utilized a wide variety of government and community resources, energized citizens, built linkages between disparate groups, and vigorously pursued grant funds from several foundations and federal programs.

For more information:

- Contact Mercer Center for Community Development (MCCD), Mercer University, at (478) 301-5370, or see www.mercer.edu/mccd.

Things to Consider

- Evaluate the situation carefully before entering into any partnership.
- Don't partner just to partner. Make sure benefits seem likely.
- Have clear-cut goals and objectives for the partnership.
- Examine the goals other partners may have for the cooperative effort.
- Make sure benefits will be proportionate to investment.
- Make sure rights and responsibilities of partners are clearly defined.
- Establish a method to determine the relative value of shared resources.
- Make sure procedures for decision-making are clearly defined and equitable.

- Make sure amendment and termination of agreement procedures are clear.
- Be certain of community support before entering into any agreement.
- Once a partnership is initiated, monitor, evaluate, and alter, as needed.
- Be clear whether the partnership is intended to be permanent, or to cease at a certain point in time.

Additional Resources and Information

Communities interested in inter-community cooperation might begin by contacting their:

- State Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations. Many states have councils or commissions on intergovernmental relations that may be able to provide advice or assistance in developing cooperative agreements. In Tennessee, for example, the Tennessee Commission on Intergovernmental Relations has played a key role in bringing counties and municipalities together to shape growth policies for their region, as required by the state's Growth Policies Act (See www.state.tn.us/tacir/).

- State Department of Local Affairs. Most states have a department of local or community affairs that may be able to provide advice or assistance in developing cooperative agreements. In Colorado, for example, the Department of Local Affairs has published *Best Practices in Intergovernmental Agreements*, at www.state.co.us/smartgrowth/Media/IGA.pdf.

Other organizational sources of assistance include:

- International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Formed in 1914, ICMA is a professional association that represents appointed managers and administrators in local governments throughout the world. Its programs and services cover a diverse array of topics important to local governments, including economic development, transportation, brownfields redevelopment, performance measurement, and health care access. For more information, call (202) 289-4262 or visit www.icma.org.

- National Association of Counties (NACo). NACo was created in 1935 when county officials wanted to have a strong voice in the nation's capital. Today, NACo's membership totals almost 2,000 counties, representing over 80 percent of the nation's population. NACo is a full-service organization that provides an extensive line of services including legislative, research, and technical as well as public affairs assistance to its members. NACo is involved in a number of special projects that deal with such issues as the environment, sustainable communities, volunteerism, and intergenerational studies. For more information, call (202) 393-6226 or visit www.naco.org.

- The National League of Cities (NLC). NLC serves as a resource to and advocate for more than 18,000 cities, villages and towns and partners with 49 state municipal leagues. Programs and services cover a broad range of issues, including affordable housing, racial justice, e-government, and workforce development. Publications relating to inter-community cooperation include: Roger S. Richman and M. H. Wilkinson, "Interlocal Revenue Sharing: Practice and Potential," *Issues & Options* (September 1993); and Patricia Salkin and Robert Heverly, "Developing Effective Regional Agreements," *Issues & Options* (April 1994). For more information, call (202) 626-3000 or visit www.nlc.org.

- The National Council for Public-Private Partnerships (NCPPP). The mission of the Washington, D.C.-based NCPPP is to advocate and facilitate the formation of public-private partnerships at the federal, state and local levels, where appropriate, and to raise the awareness of governments and businesses of the means by which their cooperation can cost effectively provide the public with quality goods, services, and facilities. NCPPP has case studies of successful partnerships, including inter-community partnerships. Contact them at (202) 467-6800 or visit the Web site at www.ncppp.org.

- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Kellogg Foundation is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to apply knowledge to solve the problems of people. Since its beginning, the Foundation has continuously focused on building the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to solve their own problems. One of its priorities is inter-community cooperation: "Ensuring a reciprocal exchange of knowledge, resources, and problem solving among communities and institutions to improve the quality of life in communities." For more information, call (616) 968-1611 or visit their Web site at www.wkkf.org.

BUSINESS INCUBATORS

Overview

Business incubators exist in enough varieties to make a single, precise definition difficult. Generally, business incubation programs involve the provision of some array of facilities, services, and assistance to new companies during the two to three year start-up period when they are most susceptible to failure. These programs can be public, private, or quasi-public; they may be for-profit or non-profit; and the menu of services they offer their clients may be quite limited or very broad.

A common variant offers flexible and affordably priced space, a shared-use arrangement for copiers and other office machines, and a professional receptionist serving all the incubator clients. On top of these basic services, an incubator might provide any number of additional facilities, services, assistance, or networking opportunities. A key to successful establishment and operation of a business incubation program is an accurate assessment of the assets and liabilities of the existing situation. This should be followed by development of clear goals and objectives for how the incubator can best address the existing conditions in a successful manner.

Most, though not all, business incubators offer space to their clients, often at lower than market rates. Additionally, the incubator may have a variety of spaces available, from very small single offices to manufacturing bays several thousand square feet in area. The interior of the incubator building may be re-subdivided to create just the space a tenant needs. How these spaces are appointed and equipped also varies. A small office might not need any special equipment or utilities, but would need to be visually attractive, whereas a manufacturing business might require much more space and heavier electrical service, but the appearance of the space would not be of much concern.

There are several other facilities that might be provided for the common use of the tenants. These facilities could include parking areas for clients, outside storage for vehicles and machinery, or a loading/receiving dock with the associated equipment. Inside, there are often shared reception areas, as well as conference rooms. Bathrooms, break rooms, and even kitchens, may also be provided for common use. Quite often incubators offer photocopiers and fax machines for tenant use, and may provide basic phone service without any additional charge. Computers may be provided, or a shared-time arrangement on a mainframe may be offered.

Incubators commonly provide a receptionist, and may also have staff to handle security, custodial needs, and maintenance. Some incubators offer access to many varieties of professional assistance not available in-house. This might include help with developing a business or marketing plan, design and manufacturing assistance, support in obtaining financing, or legal advice. Finally, many incubators offer networking opportunities that allow their clients to develop connections while in the incubator that should will useful after the businesses assumes independent status.

Appropriateness

Business incubators aren't for everyone. First, communities must be willing to make a major upfront commitment in terms of leadership and financial resources, and have a reasonable expectation of attracting and sustaining high quality management expertise and resources to run the incubator over the long haul. Second, exploring incubators requires considerable study since it is not the case that "if you build it, they will come." An incubator program should be considered only after it has been determined that there is a need for such a program, and that there is a strong likelihood that facilities and services offered through the incubator program will continue to be in demand over the long-term. Still, incubators can be an important element of a community's efforts to foster entrepreneurship.

Implementation

Glancing at the six steps listed below may give the appearance that the creation of an incubator program is a simple task. A closer reading reveals that several of the steps will require a lot of leg-work, prolonged discussion among interested parties, and some tough decision-making. What sort of building and services? What criteria for potential clients? Who has final authority for decision-making? Go it alone, or partner with another town or county? How much financial support is appropriate, and what is its source?

As in most planning and development efforts, one of the most critical steps is the assessment of the current situation. You must avoid the trap of deciding first that an incubator will solve your problems, and then finding a way to support that decision. Collect and evaluate information about your current situation carefully and at length. With a clear understanding of the present, you will be better equipped to make decisions on whether an incubator will serve the community's needs and, if so, in what form and under what conditions.

1) Assess the local situation to determine need.
2) Develop goals and objectives for how to serve those needs.
3) Determine whether local officials and citizens support creation of an incubator program, even if it may never become self-sustaining.
4) Develop guidelines for the operation of the incubator.
5) Secure a facility, make needed alterations, and begin operation.
6) Monitor operation. Evaluate performance. Alter operation as needed.

Examples

Ozark, Alabama
Ozark Technology Center (OTC) opened its doors in 1996, funded by the state of Alabama and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development program. Assistance in the development of the Center came from Auburn University, Wallace College, and the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission.

OTC is sponsored by the City of Ozark and serves a seven county, predominantly rural, area in southeast Alabama.

OTC might be termed a "conventional" incubator in terms of the facilities and services offered. Its 24,000 square foot building is located adjacent to U.S. Highway 231, and is subdivided into offices, office suites, research suites, and manufacturing bays. OTC offers shared use of such facilities as a lighted parking area, conference room, small business resource library, reception area, and loading dock. Available services include standard office machines and equipment, Internet access, receptionist, security and custodial services, and assistance with training, planning, and financing.

Current tenants show a mix of uses, including communications, medical services and equipment, specialized production and sales, and technology. OTC also offers training programs designed to assist small business operators and potential entrepreneurs, in conjunction with partners such as Troy State University, Alabama Small Business Development Consortium, and the U.S. Small Business Administration.

For more information:

- Contact the Ozark Technology Center at (334) 774-4952 or visit their Web site at www.bizincubator.org.

Cookeville, Tennessee

Tennessee Tech's Regional Business Technology Incubator (RBTI) was established in 1998 to support the growth and success of entrepreneurial companies in rural areas of the Upper Cumberland Region. Connecting entrepreneurs in remote locations with the rest of the world through virtual space is a somewhat unique approach to running a business incubator. The RBTI operates a network of ten satellite locations in eight counties, linked to the operational hub at Tennessee Tech by video and Internet. Among the main functions are the dissemination of leading edge technology to rural communities and the promotion of E-commerce business successes in those same areas.

Developed by the Business Media Center at Tennessee Tech's College of Business Administration, RBTI is an innovative joining of traditional business and business education practices with modern computing and communication practices. It offers a meeting point for business and technology, giving tenants and users access to computers, software, training, and support. This allows entrepreneurs in small towns or rural areas to compete on a more equal footing with businesses physically located in or near large markets. RBTI has assisted several of the counties in the production of CD-ROMs that are used to promote the area's attractiveness for development or as a tourist destination. Several incubator tenants have also been assisted in the production of CD-ROMs that promote their products or services.

For more information:

- Contact the Tennessee Technical University's College of Business Administration at (931) 372-3372 or visit their Web site at http://www2.tntech.edu/cob. Also see www.techincubator.com.

Narrows, Virginia

The Giles Business Incubator (GBI) was established to increase the number of small businesses operating in the community in order to create jobs. GBI offers modern, professional facilities, with an array of administrative, business, and financial services. GBI provides training and technical assistance to both existing and new businesses. This training covers a range of topics, including financing, marketing, management, and business plan preparation. Located in a designated Federal Enterprise Zone, GBI can offer businesses such benefits as job grants, refund of local sales tax, and rate reductions for business, professional, and occupational license taxes. To better fulfill its mission and move toward sustainability, GBI also offers its services and training to entrepreneurs outside the incubator facility.

Owned by the Town of Narrows, GBI receives financial support from Community Development Block Grants, the Appalachian Regional Commission, local and regional businesses, and individuals. GBI has completed a business plan that indicates the facility cannot become self-sustaining, and will require continued funding at some level.

For more information:

- Call the incubator at (540) 726-3888 or see www.narrows.org/gbihist.htm.

Things to Consider

- The incubator's services and facilities must be tailored to fill a need and to fit the situation. Generally, the incubator should not duplicate or compete with existing facilities or services.
- Do not create an incubator program with the notion that it might become a revenue source for the community.
- Creating an incubator requires substantial time, effort, and capital.
- The incubator may never be self-sustaining, and might always require some form and amount of subsidy or assistance. Therefore, it must have the support and long-term commitment of the community.
- The incubator program must have clear goals and objectives.
- The necessary infrastructure, expertise, and technology to support the incubator must be present and available in the community.
- Incubators must be able to screen—and screen out—potential clients, including those who are politically connected.
- Clients must have a sustainable business model and reliable funding.

Additional Resources and Information

The National Business Incubation Association has an extensive collection of resource materials that are available for purchase via its on-line bookstore, at www.nbia.org/store/. Highlights include:

- Adkins, Dinah, Hugh Sherman and Christine Yost. *Incubating in Rural Areas: Challenges and Keys to Success* (Athens, OH: National Business Incubation Association, May 2001).

- Hayhow, Sally. *A Comprehensive Guide to Business Incubation* (Athens, OH: National Business Incubation Association, 1996).

- Meeder, Robert. *Forging the Incubator: How to Design and Implement a Feasibility Study for Business Incubation Programs* (Athens, OH: National Business Incubation Association).

- Rice, Mark, Julius Morgan, Jana Mathews, Laura Kilcrease, Susan Matlock, Robert Meeder, and Robert Sherwood. *Growing New Ventures, Creating New Jobs: Principles and Practices of Successful Business Incubation* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995).

- Tornatzky, Lou, Yolanda Batts, Nancy McCrea, Marsha Shook and Louisa Quittman. *The Art and Craft of Technology Business Incubation: Best Practices, Strategies, and Tools from 50 Programs* (Research Triangle Park, NC: Southern Technology Council and the National Business Incubation Association, 1996).

- University of Michigan, National Business Incubation Association, Southern Technology Council, and Ohio University, *Business Incubation Works* (Athens, OH: National Business Incubation Association, 1997).

- Wolfe, Chuck, Dinah Adkins, and Hugh Sherman. *Best Practices in Action: Guidelines for Implementing First-Class Business Incubation Programs* (Athens, OH: National Business Incubation Association, 2001).

Organizational sources of assistance include:

- Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). Congress established the ARC in 1965 to support economic and social development in Appalachia. The Commission is a unique partnership composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states and a presidential appointee representing the federal government. In 1998, the ARC launched a multi-year, Entrepreneurship Initiative to build entrepreneurial economies in the Appalachian Region. As part of this Initiative, the Commission formed a Business Incubation Advisory Committee to guide program activities to help strengthen existing incubators and support newly created ones in Appalachia. Among the activities coming out of this initiative is a publication entitled, *Business Incubation at Work: A survey of business incubators operating in Appalachia.* Access the publication at www.arc.gov/programs/reginit/incsurv/bitoc.htm or contact ARC's Entrepreneurship Initiative Manager at (202) 884-7777.

- National Business Incubation Association (NBIA). NBIA is the premier organization for business incubation. It provides thousands of professionals with the information, education, advocacy, and networking resources to bring excellence to the process of assisting early-stage companies. Contact them in Athens, Ohio, at (740) 593-4331 or visit the Web site at www.nbia.org.

- State Business Incubation Associations. Many states have incubation associations. The Alabama Business Incubation Network, for example, is an organization of business incubation facilities in the state of Alabama established for the purpose of sharing collective knowledge and expertise among existing and developing business incubation facilities. The NBIA maintains a list of state associations and related contact information at www.nbia.org/group.html.

DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION & HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Overview

Downtown revitalization and historic preservation, loosely defined, could each mean many things. Downtown revitalization could be applied to any activity intended to bolster the fortunes of a community's downtown area. Historic preservation is an even broader concept, covering just about any sort of endeavor to protect, restore, rehabilitate, or reuse any kind of historic asset. For our purposes, we will shrink the terms somewhat, to reflect how they are generally used in a planning context. While they are separate concepts, downtown revitalization and historic preservation are lumped together because they are often undertaken as complementary projects. Though it can imply many other sorts of activity in a variety of settings, historic preservation is sometimes a piece of the larger downtown revitalization picture, rather than a separate project. A downtown revitalization program can be broken into the following steps:

1) Assessing the current downtown situation;
2) Setting goals and objectives;
3) Developing projects and programs;
4) Assigning responsibilities;
5) Implementation; and
6) Monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting.

In the context of downtown revitalization, historic preservation is one strategy to enhance the attractiveness of the downtown area. It can imply an array of activity, including preservation of historic assets, rehabilitation of dilapidated historic structures, reuse of vacant historic structures, or the enactment of a local historic preservation ordinance to protect historic assets.

One activity linking revitalization and preservation is façade improvement. In many towns, downtown business owners in past years have tried to improve historic commercial building fronts by covering them with metal sheeting, by altering the doors and windows, or by removing architectural details to give a smoother look. These actions were usually attempts to make old buildings look new, and were seen as necessary steps to hold or recapture shoppers who were increasingly leaving downtown to shop in newer shopping centers on the outskirts. In many cases, the changes diminished the historic character and attractiveness that had been present before the alterations. Some towns offer design assistance or grant funds to building owners who restore facades to a more appropriate historic configuration.

One source of information, design assistance and grant funds is the Main Street Program of the U.S. Department of the Interior. This program emphasizes historic preservation as an important element of a successful downtown revitalization and economic development effort. There are currently hundreds of Main Street communities nationwide that have benefited from this program's tested approach. Information is available through your

State Historic Preservation Office, or from the national headquarters, which is listed under the "Additional Resources" heading at the end of this text.

Appropriateness

It is almost never a good idea to simply assume that the downtown is dead, or dying, and that efforts to revive it would be wasted. It is important to base your decisions on fact, and not on emotion. Old buildings, particularly when they exist in large numbers and in relatively untouched settings, such as around the town square, can exert a powerful influence. This feeling of connectedness to the past, both of the place and the local culture, is not a bad thing. It is why historic preservation has become virtually an industry unto itself. At the same time, a fine stock of well-preserved old buildings, without the presence of other factors, is generally not enough to sustain a downtown district.

There are several factors to weigh when considering initiating a downtown revitalization program. These factors should be considered jointly to see how they fit together to offset or complement each other. A weakness in one area might be balanced by strength in another, or might be addressed by a project or program. The one factor that must always be present is community support for the revitalization effort.

- Market Potential

  This is one area where you might consider utilizing the services of a professional to conduct a market study. Such services may be available at no cost, or at reduced rates, from colleges and universities, or government agencies or non-profit groups. Grant funds may also be available for such studies.

- Resource Availability

  A large project, thoughtfully conceived and conducted, should yield greater results than a small project. A large project that stalls because of inadequate resources fails not only in the present, but it also makes future efforts more difficult. Individuals or businesses that put time and money into a plan that falls flat are going to be difficult to recruit for the next project, no matter how much better that project might be. A project must be of a certain minimum size, depending on your circumstances, to exert any appreciable effect, but the scale of the project must be doable with the available resources.

- Quality and Quantity of Historic Structures and Elements

  If historic preservation is to be an important element of your revitalization plan, you should be sure that what you are preserving is worth the effort. A building does not have to be an example of grand architecture, or 200 years old to be significant. However, renovating and reusing old buildings, though sometimes cheaper than new construction, can sometimes be quite expensive because of deterioration or the cost of meeting modern building codes. For these reasons, this is another area where consideration should be given to using the services of a professional. Again, there are sources of assistance for this activity at universities, state and local preservation groups and agencies, and through national groups such as the National Trust.

- Community Support and Long-term Commitment

  No matter how good your plan is, and how significant and well preserved your local historic buildings are, if you do not have community support, you are probably destined to fail. Gauging public sentiment about such projects should occur early in the process, before substantial effort or funds are committed or utilized. It may be possible to shape public opinion somewhat on these issues, but without support from officials and citizens, there is little chance for success.

Implementation

1) Assessing the Current Downtown Situation

   The first step in the revitalization effort is an assessment of the current situation in the downtown area and its position, or role, as a part of the surrounding community. While problems should be noted and addressed, the primary aim should be to identify opportunities that are not being realized to their fullest potential. Even situations that are clearly problematic should be handled in the best light possible. This section is written under the assumption that many small towns will be unable to afford professional consultants for this assessment, but every effort should still be made to enlist the best available expertise. By that we mean you should try to involve as many of the property owners, business operators, and residents from the study area as possible. They are the experts on your downtown. The assessment should address such items as:

   - An identification and assessment of downtown's competition that could be summed up as "what is it, and how far?" Is it a group of similar businesses the next town over, the mixed-use strip center just outside downtown or the huge discount mega mart 20 miles away? What advantages does the competition seem to have compared to downtown? What disadvantages? How could you capitalize on the disadvantages?
   - An assessment of the "draw" of downtown. Other than the businesses, what is there in downtown that might attract people to the area? Are there any cultural or recreational opportunities? How about local governmental offices? Whatever there is, how do you make the most of it?
   - Is the downtown environment safe and attractive? Is it convenient to reach downtown and, once there, is it easy to move between various downtown elements? Is parking plentiful? Is parking accessible for handicapped persons?

- What, and how many, businesses are in downtown? Are there any unique shops or services? Any coordination of products or services? Any coordination of hours of operation or scheduling of special sales events?

If you are considering historic preservation as an element of your revitalization plan, you will also need to assess the structures in your downtown. It will be necessary to have someone with expertise onboard for this assessment, at least in an advisory capacity. "Historically significant" does not mean a structure has to be unique architecturally or connected to a famous person or great event, though if you have such structures, consider yourself lucky. A building 50 years old or older is considered historic, and significance can be based on one of many criteria, or combinations of those criteria. A significant structure can be one that is a good example of a particular type or style of architecture, one that is attached to noteworthy local people or events, or a building that, simply by its physical presence, has helped define the character of downtown. You will also need some professional design assistance when planning for the rehabilitation of any historic structures or facades. Not only will these professionals help insure that historic buildings retain their character after rehabilitation, but they will be likely to have some familiarity with possible tax benefits or available grant funds for historic rehabilitation.

As part of the assessment of current conditions, communities should also examine local codes and ordinances to assess their impact on historic buildings and downtown revitalization efforts. Building codes and ordinances, for example, can make preservation prohibitively expensive by requiring strict adherence to modern building standards. Some states and communities have amended their building codes and ordinances to remove barriers to downtown revitalization and the reuse of existing structures.

2) Setting Goals and Objectives

Long-range goals for downtown revitalization are probably pretty consistent from town to town. They usually include regaining status as the main shopping district for the area, expanding the tax base, creating jobs, and preventing the loss of the downtown built environment, and with it any physical sense of community character or heritage. Shorter-range objectives might include rehabilitating and reusing vacant buildings, attracting new businesses, making improvements to downtown public spaces, and improving the image of the downtown area.

3) Developing Projects and Programs

Based on what is revealed about your downtown in steps 1 and 2, projects and programs must be developed to move forward. In short, you look at where you are, at what your resources are, and at where you would like to be. Then you make decisions about how to accomplish your goals in the most efficient, timely fashion. Finally, there must be performance benchmarks or some other means of measuring the progress of the programs and projects toward reaching your overall goals.

As a long-term project, communities may want to explore including an historic preservation element in their long-range or comprehensive plan in order to help ensure that future land use and capital improvement decisions do not have a negative impact on historical resources.

4) Assigning Responsibilities and Implementation

As with many of the individual steps in the planning process, the implementation plan need not be overly technical or complicated. There simply must be clear guidelines about who does what, and when they do it, or complete it. There should also be at least a rough framework developed for how activities are to be carried out so that consistency is maintained between various agencies and individuals. This will also be helpful during the inevitable changes that will occur, both to staff and to elected officials. As mentioned previously, there should be some method of measuring progress, or completion, of the various programs and activities. This should be established before a program is initiated, and should address what constitutes appropriate conduct, or completion, of an activity, as well as what individual or board will review progress.

5) Monitoring, Evaluating and Adjusting

Once an activity is underway, there is sometimes a tendency to give it less attention than it may require or deserve. This may be particularly true after the often hectic and rigorous process of creating and securing approval for a revitalization or preservation plan is over. To insure that all that work results in the best possible outcome, it is important to monitor the progress of all activities against the benchmarks established for them. After evaluating the results of monitoring, it may be necessary to make changes in the activity. This should be done carefully to determine if it is a problem inherent to the activity, a problem with the mode of implementation, or a problem with whoever is conducting the activity. Don’t neglect to “measure the measurements” to make sure that the progress benchmarks that were developed for the activity are functioning as they should and are not overly optimistic or demanding.

Examples

Cordell, Oklahoma
Cordell, Oklahoma, with a population of just fewer than 3,000, was named a Great American Main Street Award winner in 1999. Historic preservation served as the cornerstone of the town’s efforts to rebuild the community’s economy after Oklahoma’s agricultural and oil bust and the collapse of three locally owned banks and a savings and loan precipitated an economic crisis in the 1980s. Among the town’s accomplishments are the conversion of a hospital and dry goods store into moderately-priced housing for

the elderly, the transformation of a former tire shop and gas station into a state-of-the-art police complex, and completion of a $1.25 million downtown streetscape project. All told, 42 storefronts have been restored and 45 buildings have been rehabilitated, contributing to an increase in both jobs and tax revenues downtown.

For more information:

- See http://www.mainst.org/GAMSA/Gamsa99/cordell.htm

Okolona, Mississippi

Okolona experienced changes to its commercial core over the last few decades that are common to many small towns. Much of the new commercial development moved away from the old town center. Many downtown buildings lost their tenants and, after extended periods of vacancy, fell into disrepair or were razed. Buildings that remained occupied were often subject to alterations that, though done in the hope of attracting customers with a more modern look, only managed to destroy or cover unique historic architectural features.

Re-Thinking Downtown Buildings, a study by the Small Town Center at Mississippi State University, proposes the re-creation of some of the traditional look and feel of Okolona's downtown area. It stresses that, aside from their potential commercial value in a revitalized downtown, these old buildings are also valuable as tangible reminders of Okolona's past. The rehabilitation and reuse of these buildings could bring to mind the community's prosperous past, and remind citizens that big things are possible, even in small towns.

The study also includes an informational history of how historic buildings with traditional storefronts evolved into their current forms. This is followed by an explanatory text that highlights the elements of commercial facades that give a traditional downtown its unique look. The study concludes with a brief guide on how to rehabilitate an altered façade so as to recapture its original flavor. This includes information on façade elements, materials and finishes.

For more information:

- Contact The Small Town Center, Mississippi State University, School of Architecture, at (601) 325-2207, or see http://smalltown.sarc.msstate.edu

Cuthbert, Georgia

Standing beside U.S. Highway 82, one of Cuthbert's main thoroughfares, the Muse-Maloof-Gamble House is a beautiful example of Greek Revival architecture. Constructed in the 1850s as a dormitory for the young ladies at Bethel Baptist Female College, the house had seen its fortunes fall in recent years. It served as a single-family house before being subdivided into apartments. Beginning in the 1970s, the house endured nearly 30 years of disuse, one of the direst threats to the survival of any historic structure. Though there were many purchase offers made to the owner over that period, all the potential buyers intended to move the house off its original site. Faced with the prospect of the structure being moved out of the community, the City of Cuthbert decided to act.

The Cuthbert Better Hometown organization, in partnership with the Randolph County Historical Society and the City of Cuthbert, began a drive to raise funds. At present, funds have been secured from local, state, and private sources. These funds have made possible the purchase of the house, and the initiation of renovation of the structure. Plans call for the refurbished house to serve a variety of functions. Because of its prominent location at one of the primary entrances to Cuthbert, the city intends to use the house as a welcome center for the city and region. Other proposed uses for portions of the large structure include a museum for artifacts of local significance and conference space for local and regional civic meetings. Finally, Cuthbert Better Hometown, which will manage the Muse-Maloof-Gamble House, will have offices in the building.

For more information:

- Contact the Randolph County Historical Society, in care of the City of Cuthbert, at (229) 732-3761.

Marion, Alabama

The *Initiative: Marion* project involved a comprehensive look at the whole town of Marion, Alabama, but with a focus on downtown and a strong emphasis on design and historic preservation. The finished project document is a large-format 24-page booklet that makes effective use of photographs, maps, plans, and façade drawings. Existing conditions are inventoried and presented in text as “issues and opportunities,” while also being illustrated through the use of diagrams that greatly enhance the reader’s ability to visualize the interconnectedness of the various elements. As might be expected with the emphasis on design, much is made of visual problems and opportunities, with many suggestions for the creation of stronger entries to the town and visual linkages between important sites and centers of activity. Downtown is clearly the focal point of the effort, and proposed improvements include façade restoration, sympathetic infill construction on vacant sites, and suggested ways of enhancing the economic potential of the business district of Marion.

For more information:

- Contact the Auburn University Center for Architecture and Urban Studies at (205) 323-3592.

Winfield, Alabama

Winfield used the highly successful Main Street Model of the National Trust for Historic Preservation to revitalize its downtown area. This method classifies project actions into four categories:

- Organization;
- Economic Restructuring;

- Promotions; and
- Design.

One of the problems addressed was the presence of two heavily traveled U.S. highways that also served as local thoroughfares. Much of the through traffic will be routed around downtown when a proposed highway corridor is completed. This will reduce traffic problems, but may also diminish the vitality of downtown activity. The Main Street Program is intended to help avert this possibility. A six-member team from Design Alabama proposed visual amenities downtown, as well as the use of visual gateway improvements to mark the transition between rural areas and downtown. In the downtown area, the team proposed changes to:

- Improve access to facilities and services;
- Create new business opportunities;
- Provide better parking; and
- Assist with the rehabilitation of historic downtown buildings, including both financial and design help.

The program has resulted in 10 new or expanded businesses, and a net gain of 10 jobs in the downtown area. It has also seen the formation of Junior Main Street, intended to involve high school juniors and seniors in civic affairs. Finally, downtown partners have increased their level of participation in and promotion of Mule Day, Winfield's annual parade and festival.

For more information:

- Contact Winfield Main Street, at (205) 487-8841.

Things to Consider

- No matter how appealing the idea of revitalizing downtown and preserving historic buildings, such efforts must be guided by good information and rational decision-making.
- The intangible value of revitalizing the core of your community and saving historic buildings is great, but must not override the realities of your situation.
- It is very important to have a high rate of participation in any downtown program. Too many non-participants scattered through the area can seriously dissipate the energy of the revitalization effort.
- Continually strive to keep all involved parties informed and on board.
- Conduct your inventory and evaluation thoroughly and carefully. Hard work may not be enough to overcome decisions based on faulty assumptions.
- Some effort should be made to predict, and avoid, any negative effects a successful downtown revitalization might have on other areas of the community.
- Don't rely on retail redevelopment to single-handedly power downtown revitalization.

- Make downtown owners/operators/residents partners in the effort. Be sure there is a forum for their opinions and questions.
- Don't let down once the initial stages are complete. Monitor, evaluate, and adjust.
- Money and assistance are out there for this sort of effort. Vigorously pursue both.
- Remember – maintaining a healthy downtown is a project that never ends.

Additional Resources and Information

Resource materials on historic preservation and downtown revitalization include:

- Glisson, Linda. *Main Street Success Stories* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1997). Order online from http://www.planning.org/store/.

- Kemp, Roger. *Main Street Renewal: A Handbook for Citizens and Public Officials* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 2000). Order online from www.downtowndevelopment.com.

- McMahon, Edward. "Building Codes Get Smarter," *Planning Commissioners Journal*, No. 43 (Summer 2001). Order online at http://www.plannersweb.com/.

- Morris, Marya. *Innovative Tools for Historic Preservation*, Planning Advisory Service Report No. 438 (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1992). Order online from http://www.planning.org/store/.

- White, Bradford and Richard Roddewig. *Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan*, Planning Advisory Service Report No. 450 (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1994). Order online from http://www.planning.org/store/.

Organizational sources of assistance include:

- American Planning Association (APA). APA (which also has state chapters) is a nonprofit, professional, and educational association that promotes the field of planning. It represents 30,000 practicing planners, elected and appointed officials, and citizens concerned with city and regional planning. The APA can be reached in two locations: in Chicago at (312) 431-9100 and in Washington, D.C. at (202) 872-0611. Their Web site includes an on-line catalog of books and reports at www.planning.org/store/. The bookstore includes numerous resources related to historic preservation and downtown revitalization, including such titles as *Main Street Success Stories*, *Preparing a Historic Preservation Plan*, and *Niche Strategies for Downtown Revitalization*.

- Downtown Research and Development Center. This Center publishes two newsletters related to downtown revitalization: *Downtown Idea Exchange* and *Downtown Promotion Report*. The Center's Web site, at www.downtowndevelopment.com, also lists a number of other relevant publications that are available for purchase online.

- The National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils was established in 1988 to represent America's 348 local Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils. These councils are made up of Conservation districts, and county governments, municipalities, state agencies, comprehensive planning agencies, and local, non-profit organizations. RC&D Councils also receive federal funds and technical assistance provided by the Natural Resources Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Specifically, an RC&D Area usually covers several counties, in which residents work to improve their economy and the environment through the conservation, development, and better utilization of their natural resources. RC&D places heavy emphasis on natural resources. Local individual projects can include training programs or historic preservation. For more information call (202) 434-4781 or visit their Web site at www.rcdnet.org.

- The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO). Based in Washington, D.C., NCSHPO is the professional association of the state government officials who carry out the national historic preservation program as delegates of the Secretary of the Interior pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act. A list of State Historic Preservation Officers is available by calling (202) 624-5465. Visit the Web site at www.sso.org/ncshpo.

- National Trust for Historic Preservation and National Main Street Center. Founded in 1949, The National Trust for Historic Preservation provides leadership, education and advocacy to save America's diverse historic places and revitalize communities. One of its programs is the National Main Street Center, created in 1980 as a human resource and technical reference center to stimulate economic development in the context of historic preservation in towns and small cities. The Center conducts training courses, provides technical assistance to states and towns, helps build business and government partnerships, and operates a membership network. For information about the Center and links to relevant publications, call (202) 588-6219 or visit their Web site, at www.mainst.org. Information on Main Street award-winning communities is available at www.mainst.org/GAMSA/Gamsa.htm. For information about the National Trust, call (202) 588-6219 or visit the Web site at www.nthp.org.

- Planning Commissioners Journal (PCJ). PCJ is a bi-monthly publication targeted at citizen planners, including members of local planning commissions and zoning boards. Users can search on-line, at www.plannersweb.com, for articles related to historic preservation and downtown revitalization.

- The Rural Information Center at the U. S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Library has a web site containing an extensive list of historic preservation resources, including federal resources, state historic preservation offices, national organizations, and journals. See "Historic Preservation Resources" at www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/preserve.html.

- The Rural School and Community Trust's Internet site features links to provide assistance with school rehabilitation and renovation projects. For more information see http://www.ruralchallengepolicy.org/fac_major.html.

RURAL AND SMALL TOWN E-GOVERNMENT

Definition

Information technologies such as the Internet, personal digital assistants, and Web TV are opening up new opportunities for small towns to plan for growth. Perhaps the greatest contributions of e-government are in improved information dissemination and civic participation.

First, town Web sites can offer citizens effortless access to detailed information about government affairs as varied as agendas of upcoming meetings and program information. This can be a powerful tool in the planning process, enabling volunteers and concerned citizens alike the opportunity to track progress in plan development and implementation. If the site includes a feedback system, citizens can use the site to comment on proposed changes to the plan, or even to talk with one another.

Second, e-government can also help communities interested in promoting growth. By providing useful information in an easily obtained manner, prospective businesses can study a town's potential in order to make efficient and effective decisions about relocation, expansion, and start-up. Making information free and easy to access can save the towns and businesses both time and expenses.

In either case, today, most prospective businesses and residents demand services compatible with the latest technology. E-government is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate a town's vision and responsiveness.

Specifically, e-government is already being used in some communities to allow residents and businesses to:

- Make payments on-line for taxes and bills such as water;
- View maps of the city;
- Check bus routes and schedules;
- E-mail the city council and other city officials;
- Apply for city jobs;
- Report problems or submit complaints about city services;
- Look up real estate information;
- Apply for permits;
- Request special trash pickup;
- Renew a license;
- Search public records; and
- Register for recreation classes or other programs.

The trend to e-government is strong. According to the Meta Group, cities and towns spent an estimated $500 million in 2000 for e-government related activities. The Meta Group anticipates that this figure will grow to $1.6 billion by 2003. Additionally, Forrester Research reports that by 2006, federal, state, and local governments will collect 15 percent of fees and taxes online, for a total of about $602 billion.

Appropriateness

Not every small community is ready to leap into e-government. There are equipment requirements and, more important, personnel and training implications to setting up and maintaining basic e-government services. Yet there are compelling reasons why any community should consider the option seriously, not the least of which is that it is fast becoming the norm, and a community without e-government will be virtually invisible to the larger world, or even to many of its residents.

According to David Sullivan, Chief Information Officer for Virginia Beach, Virginia, rural and small towns should consider e-government because it streamlines government and offers better services to citizens and businesses. Because it allows citizens and businesses to serve themselves, city personnel spend less time providing routine information, which means they have more time to deal with challenging tasks and respond to unique needs and inquiries. E-government is also popular with residents and businesses because it provides service when they need it, from wherever they are, and not just during standard office hours at one location. This is a real boon for time-pressed residents, residents with limited mobility, and those who work. E-government can also allow a city to provide a wider range of information and customize the services provided. In short, e-government can be better, faster, and cheaper than other modes of government service provision.

Implementation

Forrester Research reports that it is a lack of technological sophistication, not financial resources, that prevent most local governments from adopting e-government practices. Technological sophistication means knowing how to apply e-government effectively across all government operations, making appropriate equipment and software choices, and creating a Web presence that is easy to navigate without compromising confidential information. This requires a knowledgeable Web administrator who is accountable for the overall performance of the Web site. It may also require all government employees to adopt new habits in public relations: the full power of e-government is lost if only one agency is wired, if the posted information is updated infrequently, or if there’s no mechanism for citizen feedback and government response to that input.

To adopt effective e-government, several recommendations are advised:

1. Start with visionary leadership, both political and executive. This is needed to provide the fuel to make seemingly unrealistic goals a reality. It is also needed to ensure that e-government is understood and used effectively throughout government operations.
2. Obtain internal and external technology leadership and skills. An individual or, even better, a team, needs to be given responsibility for designing and implementing an e-

government system. Some initial advice, training and technical assistance might be acquired at no charge from the local university, community college, or even high school.

3. Develop a long-term, government-wide strategic plan for transitioning into e-government. Upfront planning can significantly reduce costs and improve service quality. Many a government has allowed their agencies to purchase and develop their own Web systems, only to discover that the equipment and software is incompatible, thus hindering inter-agency collaboration. A plan furthermore ensures the financial requirements have been considered and provided for, thus avoiding the trap of buying into a system that is too expensive to maintain or expand. A plan also breaks implementation into manageable steps and, in the process, can generate needed buy-in from agencies and citizens.
4. Make a commitment to a customer-friendly system. Provisions should be made to identify and provide e-government services that citizens increasingly expect (i.e., the ability to access detailed, current information about the government's business; the ability to conduct routine business with the government online; and the ability to email or locate phone numbers for government offices and employees). The Web site should also permit easy navigation.
5. Partner with local and national businesses, other government agencies, and universities can provide valuable resources, leadership, and technological expertise. Finally, funding that addressed each stage of the plan will allow for timely and appropriate implementation of the plan.

Things to Consider

- Build e-government considerations into any strategic planning effort. For instance, a transportation plan might include as an objective the posting of routes, schedules, rates, and agency phone numbers on the community's Web site.
- Consider using e-government as a tool in any strategic planning process, such as allowing citizens to reply via email to surveys or using the Internet to view alternative maps or proposals.
- Seek technical advice and support from local educational institutions, regional or national associations for local governments, or neighboring communities that have already adopted e-government.
- Factor in staff training. Updating posted information and being responsive to emails may require new habits.
- Think long-term. Pervasive use of e-government is inevitable, and even if your community can only take baby steps at this time, those steps should be headed in the direction of long-term objectives.
- Develop realistic expectations among community leaders about the financial impact of instituting e-government. E-government processes are expensive to establish and maintain. This is especially true if old customer service processes such as paying bills by mail must be sustained for those citizens without Internet access.

Examples

Virginia Beach, Virginia
The state of Virginia has an executive order requiring all local governments to begin to develop "government without walls." Virginia Beach has already begun the implementation process. The first stage has included the development of Web sites that allow access to a multitude of governmental resources. The vision of Virginia Beach's e-government includes giving citizens the ability to:

- Make payments to the city from home at any hour of day or night;
- Access public information from home, their place of business, public buildings, community-based kiosks or distant locations, such as a Navy ship on deployment;
- Express concerns about and/or obtain results of a zoning change, conditional use permit, and variance requests on the day of the hearing;
- Complete one application or data entry for all departments and agencies within the city government;
- Have shorter wait times when choosing to conduct business by telephone or in person; and
- Directly inform elected representatives of their views on policy issues.

For more information:

- See www.vbgov.com and www.egov.state.va.us, or call the state's Electronic Government Implementation Division at (804) 786-1434.

Calera, Alabama
"Large enough to be progressively aware, yet small enough to care," is the motto of this town of 3,100 in central Alabama which prides itself in utilizing e-government techniques to demonstrate its progressiveness. These factors are evident on the city's Web site, which provides information on the Mayor's office, city services and agencies, attractions and events, and business and community resources. The Web site also provides links to the mayor, the city clerk, the chief of police, and the library as well as an opportunity to download an employment application. Under the business resource section, citizens and prospective businesses can obtain information about the labor force; taxes; industrial development; city, county and state maps; transportation; and the commerce park. Additionally, they can learn about the community and its resources for both individual and businesses in categories such as schools; housing; employment; museums; churches; recreational facilities; and upcoming community events.

For more information:

- Call (205) 668-3505 or visit the Web site at www.cityofcalera.org.

Townsend, Tennessee

Known as "The Peaceful Side of the Smokies," the Townsend area has an abundance of accommodations, craft shops, seasonal festivals, and outdoor activities to attract vacationers and retirees. Its Chamber of Commerce developed a Web site to serve existing residents and businesses as well as attract prospective residents, tourists, and businesses. The Web site includes information about local attractions, history, schools, government, taxes, the planning department, governmental officials, how to obtain a permit, a map, information from the Chamber of Commerce, listing of local businesses, churches, and conference facilities.

For more information:

- See www.townsendchamber.org.

Goodwater, Alabama

Located in east central Alabama, the town of 1,633 has begun to implement e-government. At www.goodwater.org, users can find information on the mayor and council, boards and commissions, city department leaders, the history of Goodwater, city hall, fire and ambulance services, the library, public works, planning, parks and recreation, senior citizens centers, public transportation, and Goodwater businesses. Although most of the Web site is under construction, it demonstrates the community's willingness to scale the learning curve by incorporating technology into the services provided to citizens, businesses, and potential contributors to the community.

For more information:

- Call (256) 839-6301.

Additional Resources and Information

Key sources of resource material on planning for e-government include:

- Center for Technology in Government, *A World Web Starter Kit*, at www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/inettb/startkit.html.

- *Government Technology* magazine, at www.govtech.net.

- Governor's e-Communities Task Force, Commonwealth of Virginia. *Building a Digital Community: A Leadership Guidebook* (March 2001), at www.ieg.ibm.com/thought_leadership/guidelines.pdf.

- National Center for Small Communities. *Getting Online: A guide to the Internet for small town leaders*, at www.natat.org/ncsc/Pubs/Getting%20Online/getting_online.htm.

- National League of Cities and Public Technology, Inc. *E-Government: City Hall Without Walls* (Dec. 2000), at www.pti.org/links/PTI_NLC_egovkit.doc.

- U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Technology Opportunities Program. *Community Connections: Preserving Local Values in the Information Age* (September 2000), at www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/top/publicationmedia/comm_conn/community_connections_illus.html.

Other organizational sources of assistance include:

- Access Minnesota Main Street. The University of Minnesota Extension Service has developed an on-line curriculum to help educate leaders and businesses about the potential for enhancing rural economic development through electronic commerce. Call Access Minnesota Main Street at (612) 625-8776 or view their Web site at www.extension.umn.edu/mainstreet. The curriculum materials are available at www.extension.umn.edu/mainstreet/curriculum/index.html.

- Center for eGovernance. The Center for eGovernance at the National Academy of Public Administration was established to explore policy issues related to e-governance and to provide a forum for related discussion, research, and collaboration among public and private sector organizations. Among the Center's offerings is a clearinghouse on education and training programs related to e-governance. The Center recently launched a Seal of Good eGovernance Award program to recognize governments that have developed innovative uses of information technology to interact with their customers and deliver services. See www.napawash.org/cim.nsf/pages/aboutjce/.

- Center for Technology in Government (CTG). CTG's mission is to solve problems related to public services through the use of information technology in state and local government. CTG, which was created in 1993, won an *Innovations in American Government* award in 1995. The Center is located at the State University of New York at Albany. Contact CTG at (518) 442-3892 or visit their Web site at www.ctg.albany.edu.

- GovOffice.com. GovOffice.com offers a customized Web site creation and management system to governments in communities of all sizes. Partners include the International City/County Management Association, the League of Minnesota Cities, and private sector partners Avent and Microsoft Corporation. Call GovOffice.com at (877) 564-4979 or visit their Web site at www.govoffice.com.

- IBM's Institute for Electronic Government. IBM created the Institute for Electronic Government in 1995 to serve as a resource on electronic government for public sector leaders worldwide. IEG's Washington, D.C. office includes a demonstration facility designed to provide non-technical, public sector leaders with examples of technology being used by governments around the world. The settings range from a citizen's living room to a school classroom. Visit IEG's Web site at www.ieg.ibm.com.

- National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). The NTIA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce and is the administration's principal voice on telecommunications issues. NTIA promotes the widespread use of advanced telecommunications and information technologies in the public and non-profit sectors. Its Technology Opportunities program (TOP) provides matching grants to state and local governments and non-profit entities to help them develop information infrastructures and services that are accessible to all citizens, in rural as well as urban areas. For more information call (202) 482-1840 or visit their Web site at www.ntia.doc.gov.

- Public Technology, Inc (PTI). Created in 1971, PTI is dedicated to furthering the use of technology in both cities and counties, for both elected officials and professional managers. The National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, and the International City/County Management Association provide PTI with its policy direction. Contact them at (800) 852-4934 or visit their Web site at http://pti.nw.dc.us.

- U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Utilities Services (RUS). The RUS helps rural utilities expand and keep their technology up to date and establish new and vital services such as distance learning and telemedicine. RUS lends funds to public-private partnerships to finance the construction of telecommunications infrastructure in rural America. RUS is also a vital source of technical assistance for rural telecommunication systems. For more information, call (202) 720-9540 or visit the Web site at www.usda.gov/rus.

QUALITY OF LIFE / SPECIAL NICHE

Overview

Special niches are opportunities for local officials to identify and build on those physical and cultural assets that make their community unique. The local government serves as a facilitator to identify situations where those assts can be utilized to create opportunities for development based on specialized or underserved markets. With effective marketing of a special niche, local governments can boost their local property values, help older neighborhoods bloom again, make it easier for local merchants to prosper, and keep tax rates to a minimum. In order to utilize marketing, officials must devote themselves to selling their community. One of best ways to accomplish effective marketing is to identify the unique or special qualities of the community.

With the aging of the baby boomers, one of the most popular types of special niches is a planned retirement community. These communities address the needs of this growing population while capitalizing on the financial capabilities of senior adults.

A second type of special niche is tourism. Urban areas tend to have a highly developed travel industry infrastructure consisting of large inventories of amusement/recreation opportunities, accommodation facilities, and highly developed transportation centers. Tourists in these areas tend to spend a large proportion of their travel expenditures on overnight lodging.

Rural areas, on the other hand, tend to offer scenic and outdoor recreational opportunities. Campers and vacation home users are important to the local economies in these areas, and visitors tend to spend the greatest portion of their travel dollars on food, beverages, and ground transportation, particularly motor fuel. For these rural smaller communities, citizen involvement in organizing tourism is the key to success.

Combining different kinds of tourism may produce successful results in creating a tourist destination. Convention business may be combined with offerings for family-orientated recreation facilities. The educational component of cultural attractions may be combined with other recreational or entertainment destinations. The following are categories of tourism:

Cultural and Heritage Tourism

Cultural/Historical tourism is defined as travelers from outside of the host community visiting in an effort to learn about the past. It offers an appreciation and understanding of history while providing a key opportunity for travel promoters and planners. The educational experience from heritage tourism can be partnered with other tourist attractions. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has established five principles to guide heritage and tourism:

1) Focus on authenticity and quality;

2) Preserve and protect resources;
3) Make sites come alive (as exemplified in reenactments);
4) Find the fit between your community and tourism; and
5) Collaborate.

Environmental Tourism

Environmental tourism is an opportunity to provide visits to undisturbed natural areas, scenic vistas, and areas where tourists can observe plants and wildlife. Such tourism is typically tied to recreational tourism and can also be called ecotourism. The latest trend in environmental tourism is adventure travel, which includes walking, hiking, running, rafting, horseback riding, mountain biking, and canoeing in remote areas. Due to the physical characteristics of rural cities, ecotourism is a wonderful opportunity to attract new visitors and revitalize current businesses and residents.

Entertainment Destinations

Entertainment destinations typically feature major facilities, festivals, or fairs. Major facilities, including conference centers and amusement parks, provide services to a large number of people on a fairly regular basis. Initially, these projects require large capital expenditures in relation to the small economy of a rural community. Fortunately, if the facility is accurately responding to consumer demand, the facility can quickly pay for itself as well as provide economic growth in other industries such as hotels, restaurants, and retail.

Festivals and fairs are usually smaller activities, which require minimal capital or investment on the part of the municipality. Again, if the festival/fair can be linked to consumer demand, success is much more likely to occur. On the other hand, festivals/fairs typically require a high level of community support and volunteerism. Furthermore, a fair/festival typically has to grow in popularity, which can take years, before it demonstrates financial success.

Recreation and Sports Activities

This type of tourism covers a large range of activities, from full-season professional sports teams to single-day amateur tournaments or competitions. The types of sporting activities and events that can be promoted are numerous, including basketball, baseball, football, hockey, soccer, golf, swimming, tennis, cycling, volleyball, auto racing, and track and field. As interest in sports tourism has increased, the travel industry has responded with sports tours, sports museums and attractions, and promotion of sporting events to encourage tourism.

Appropriateness

The appropriateness of a special niche project is entirely dependant on the attributes of the community. These attributes include physical characteristics, volunteer and citizen mobility, current infrastructure, and accessibility.

Implementation

The key to successful implementation of a special niche is finding partnerships. These partnerships can be internal or external. Examples of internal partnerships include collaboration with citizens, local businesses, civic groups, or governmental agencies located in the community. For example, a town interested in ecotourism might work with the park authority, a local outdoor sporting store, a farmer, an environmental group, a hotel, and a local restaurant. External partnerships are those collaborations developed with resources outside of the community. Examples include neighboring communities, state governmental entities, large businesses, and national organizations.

Continuing with the previous example, if Town X decided to develop a special niche of ecotourism they would begin by developing the unique qualities of their community. In Town X, there is a farmer who owns property in which a large section is covered in trees, streams, and rocky inclines. The farmer is in some financial trouble and could benefit from a tax deduction. Furthermore, the local environmental group reports that several animals inhabit this section of land. At the end of the farmer’s land there is a small river that is currently owned by Parks and Recreation but is not utilized. The team responsible for implementation of this special niche could work to develop a weekend get-a-way package. This package would include a two day, one night “Adventure Weekend,” in which participants could hike, take horseback rides, or use mountain bikes (rentals provided by the sporting store) through a natural habitat (the farmer’s land) followed by a canoe trip down the river (supervised by Parks and Recreation). The package would include a one-night stay (in collaboration with the local hotel) and meals (provided by a local restaurant). They would advertise this package to business people attending a conference center in a neighboring urban community (external partnership), on the state’s Parks and Recreation website, with the state Office of Tourism, and to employees at the three largest manufacturing plants in the state.

Examples

Tennessee Overhill Heritage Association

The Overhill Country is an area in three counties of Southeast Tennessee—McMinn, Polk and Monroe—that got its name from the British. They referred to the cluster of Cherokee towns here as “the Overhills” because they were 24 mountains away from the Cherokee settlements of the Carolinas. Recently, the Overhill country has been described as an “open-air museum,” showing the life of the early Cherokees, the development of railroads, the growth of the copper mining industry, and the production of electricity and farming. Laced with historic transportation routes and dotted with mill villages, company towns and mines, the Tennessee Overhill presents the story of the new South along the highways and roads surrounded by mountains and rivers.

Visitors can follow rivers and trails to explore the Cherokee National Forest by car, foot, horseback or boat. For the more adventuresome there is gliding, repelling, caving, hunting, and even gold panning. Rather than high-rise buildings, many points of interest lie along the highways and backroads surrounded by forests and small towns. Museums, historic sites and reenactments tell the story of the Cherokees, fur traders, settlers, loggers, miners, textile workers, farmers and sharecroppers, all of whom came together to sculpt the legacy of the Tennessee Overhill. Many people don't know that country music had its beginnings in East Tennessee. The blending of African-American gospel, Appalachian string music, shape note singing schools and some of the classics produced a style that inspired many native sons and daughters who became professional performers.

For more information:

- Call (423) 263-7232 or see www.tennesseeoverhill.com.

Selma, Alabama

A Confederate munitions manufacturing center during the Civil War, Selma fell to Union troops after a nearby battle on April 2, 1865. In 1965 it was the center of a major black voter registration drive led by Martin Luther King, Jr.; after encountering violent opposition in the city, King organized a protest march to Montgomery, the state capital. The city's name, used in James Macpherson's Ossian poems to mean "high seat," refers to its location on a bluff above the Alabama River. City officials have capitalized on this rich tradition by promoting the Black Heritage Trail.

For more information:

- Call (334) 261-1100 or see www.visitingmontgomery.com/black/

Georgia Ecotourism/Adventure Highlights Examples

- **Chattooga River:** Guided white water rafting trips down the wild and scenic Chattooga River in the Chattahoochee National Forest.
- **Callaway Discovery Center:** 11,500 acres of clear woodland streams, shady trails and native wildlife.
- **Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge:** This gives an up-close look at the 438,000-acre Okefenokee Swamp — the largest and most ecologically intact of its kind in America.
- **Appalachian Trail:** Well known hiking trail originating in the north Georgia Mountains.
- **Cumberland Island National Seashore:** A passenger ferry operates from the waterfront in downtown St. Mary's. The area has numerous historic sites, pristine beaches, backpacking, camping, wildlife observation, salt water fishing.
- **Sweetwater Creek State Conservation Park:** A tranquil, natural setting only minutes from downtown Atlanta. The park features a variety of natural and historical resources, including Civil War textile mill ruins, nine miles of trails, streams, and a lake.

Things to Consider

- Quality is more important than value
- Convenient access is mandatory. In rural communities, transportation is key.
- Curb appeal is critical.

Additional Resources and Information

Key resource materials related to niche markets include:

- Brass, Jane (ed.) *Community Tourism Assessment Handbook* (Logan, UT: Western Rural Development Center, 1997), at http://extension.usu.edu/wrdc/ctah/.

- Green, Joslyn and Amy Jordan Webb. *Getting Started: How to Succeed in Heritage Tourism* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1999). Order on-line at www.preservationbooks.org.

- National Center for Small Communities. *Harvesting Hometown Jobs: the new small town guide to economic development* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Small Communities, 1997). Order on-line at www.natat.org/ncsc/Pubs/Economic_Development.htm.

- National Trust for Historic Preservation. *Share Your Heritage: Cultural Tourism Success Stories* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2001). Order on-line at www.preservationbooks.org.

- Potts, Thomas and Allan Marsinko. *Developing Naturally: An Exploratory Process for Nature-Based Community Tourism* (Clemson, SC: Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs), at www.strom.clemson.edu/publications/Potts/intro.pdf.

- Reeder, Richard. *Retiree-Attraction Policies for Rural Development*, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 741 (Washington, D.C.: Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, July 1998), at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aib741/.

Organizational sources of assistance include:

- The Conservation Fund (TCF). TCF is a non-membership, non-advocacy organization dedicated to protecting the nation's outdoor heritage. In addition to its land acquisition and conservation programs, TCF works with communities on issues related to sustainable development. In North Carolina, TCF's *Resourceful Communities Program* helps rural communities create new economies that enhance their natural and cultural resources. Contact TCF's Sustainable

Programs director at (703) 525-6300 or visit their Web site at www.conservationfund.org.

- International Ecotourism Society (TIES). TIES is targeted to the ecotourism professional. Based in Burlington, VT, it has six full-time employees who coordinate member services, answer inquiries, publish and distribute ecotourism publications, organize workshops, and compile a quarterly newsletter. Call (802) 651-9818 or see www.ecotourism.org.

- Rural Heritage Program. Part of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Rural Heritage Program is dedicated to the recognition and protection of rural historic and cultural resources. Through educational programs, publications, and technical assistance, the Rural Heritage Program supports the efforts of rural communities across the country to both preserve and live with their heritage. The Program works with communities on topics as diverse as farmland preservation, scenic byways, heritage areas and parks, historic roads, and sprawl. For more information call (202) 588-6204 or see www.ruralheritage.org.

- South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, The South Carolina National Heritage Corridor was established by the U.S. Congress in 1996 as one of a select number of National Heritage Areas─regions in which entire communities live and work, and where residents, businesses, and local governments have come together to conserve special landscapes and their own heritage. It encompasses a region of the state that retains a large percentage of rural landscapes. For more information, see www.sc-heritagecorridor.org.

- Sports Tourism International Council. The Council was established in 1995 a professional association for sports tourism. It conducts research, hosts and annual conference, and offers training programs in sports tourism. See www.sportquest.com/tourism/.

Appendix A

University-Based Public Service Organizations

ALABAMA

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OB 15, Room 141
1530 3rd Ave. South
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rcorley@uab.edu
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DELAWARE

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http://ccaix.jsums.edu/aboutservice.htm

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Appendix B

Southern Land Grant Universities and Cooperative Extension Services

ALABAMA

Auburn University Cooperative Extension System
109D Duncan Hall – Auburn University, AL 36849-5612
Phone: (334) 844-4444
www.aces.edu

University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service
2301 S. University Avenue – Little Rock, AR 72204
Phone: (501) 671-2000
www.uaex.edu

ARKANSAS

University of Arkansas Pine Bluff 1890 Cooperative Extension Service
1200 North University – Pine Bluff, AR 71611
Phone: (870) 543-8000
www.uapb.edu/safhs/page5.html

DELAWARE

University of Delaware Cooperative Extension
Townsend Hall – University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19717-1303
Phone: (302) 831-2504
http://ag.udel.edu/extension/index.html

FLORIDA

University of Florida Cooperative Extension
University of Florida – IFAS Extension Administration
PO Box 110210 - Gainesville, FL 32611
Phone: (352) 392-0437
www.ifas.ufl.edu

Florida A&M Cooperative Extension Services
Florida A&M University – Perry-Paige Building, Room 215 South
Tallahassee, FL 32307
Phone: (850) 599-3546
http://168.223.36.3/acad/colleges/cesta/co-op.html

GEORGIA

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service
111 Conner Hall – Athens, GA 30602-7504
Phone: (706) 542-3824
www.ces.uga.edu

Fort Valley State University Cooperative Extension Service
Fort Valley State University – Fort Valley, GA 31030
Phone: (478) 825-6296
www.aginfo.fvsu.edu/ces/overview.htm

KENTUCKY

University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service
500 Garrigus Bldg. – Lexington, KY 40546-0215
Phone: 606-257-3186
www.ca.uky.edu/ces/

Kentucky State University Cooperative Extension Program
400 East Main Street – Frankfort, KY 40601
Phone: (502) 597-6389
www.kysu.edu/landgrant/CEP/cep.htm

LOUISIANA

Louisiana State University Cooperative Extension Service
102F Efferson Hall – Baton Rouge, LA 70808-5000
Phone: (225) 578-6083
www.agctr.lsu.edu/nav/extension.htm

MARYLAND

University of Maryland Cooperative Extension
Maryland Cooperative Extension – College Park, MD 20742
Phone: (301) 405-1000
www.agnr.umd.edu/ces/

University of Maryland Eastern Shore 1890 Extension Program
2122 Henson Ctr. – Princess Anne, MD 21853
Phone: (410) 651-6206
http://umesde.umes.edu/1890-mce

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi State University Extension Service
201 Bost Ext. Ctr. – Mississippi State, MS 39762
Phone: (662) 325-3036
http://msucares.com

MISSOURI

University of Missouri Cooperative Extension Service
309 University Hall – Columbia, MO 65211-3020
Phone: (573) 882-7754
http://muextension.missouri.edu/coop/coop.htm

Alcorn State University AREAS
1000 ASU Drive 690 – Alcorn State, MS 39096-7500
Phone: (601) 877-6137
www.alcorn.edu/academic/academ/ags.htm

NORTH CAROLINA

North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension
NC State University – Raleigh, NC 27695
Phone: (800) 662-7301
www.ces.ncsu.edu

North Carolina A&T State University Cooperative Extension
1601 East Market Street – Greensboro, NC 27411
Phone: (336) 334-7979
www.ag.ncat.edu/extension/index.htm

OKLAHOMA

Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service
139 Agriculture Hall, Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078
Phone: (405) 744-5398
www.dasnr.okstate.edu/oces/

Langston University Center for Outreach Programs
P. O. Box 730 – Langston, OK 73050
Phone: (405) 466-9896
www.lunet.edu/administration/vp_acad_aff/res_exten/res_exten.htm

PUERTO RICO

University of Puerto Rico Cooperative Extension Service
P.O. Box 9030 – Mayaguez, PR 00681-9030
Phone: (787) 833-4220

SOUTH CAROLINA

Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service
Clemson University, Clemson SC 29634
Phone: (864) 656-3382
www.clemson.edu/extension/

South Carolina State University 1890 Cooperative Extension Program
1890 Extension – P.O. Box 7336 SCSU – Orangeburg, SC 29117
Phone: (803) 536-8465
www.1890.scsu.edu/CoopExt.htm

TENNESSEE

University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service
P.O. Box 1071 – Knoxville, TN 37901-1071
Phone: (901) 425-4725
www.utextension.utk.edu/

Tennessee State University Cooperative Extension Program
3500 John A. Merritt Blvd. – Nashville, TN 37209-1561
Phone: (615) 963-5491
www.tnstate.edu/cep/

VIRGINIA

Virginia Polytechnic Institute Cooperative Extension
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and Virginia State University
Blacksburg, VA 24061
Phone: (540) 231-6000
www.ext.vt.edu/ or www.vsu.edu/ext/

WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia University Cooperative Extension Service
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www.wvu.edu/~exten/